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Contested Languages and Perception of Multilingualism: A Sociolinguistic Study of Poland and Italy

Abstract

Most European states, including Poland and Italy, have diverse linguistic composition, yet only a fraction of their language varieties receive official recognition and support. While the EU promotes linguistic diversity, unrecognised forms – such as immigrant languages, some minority languages, and dialects – often lack protection and public awareness. This study, framed within folk linguistics, examines perceptions of multilingualism in Poland and Italy through an online questionnaire. By analysing how respondents classify and name language varieties such as 'dialects' and 'minority languages', we assess the impact of official recognition on social perception. Our findings reveal that 'contested languages' contribute to the perceived multilingualism of Poland and Italy and explore how lack of recognition may lead to marginalisation, reducing chances for legal protection and support. Understanding these perceptions helps sociolinguists and policymakers grasp dominant language ideologies and their implications for language planning.
Keywords: multilingualism; folk linguistics; dialects; minority languages; contested languages; Poland; Italy

1 Introduction

In Europe today, multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception. While individual monolingualism persists, especially in specific regions or social groups, the societal and institutional reality across Europe overwhelmingly favours and reflects multilingualism, making it the norm at a systemic and practical level. On the one hand, each European country has, to varying degrees, languages spoken by people who have migrated there temporarily or permanently from various European and, above all, non-European countries (Nic Craith, 2006). In addition, most people in Europe learn foreign languages, with English being the most commonly chosen language (European Commission, 2012; European Union, 2024). More than half of Europeans are bilingual, a quarter are trilingual and 10% speak more than three languages.[1] On the other hand, around 40–50 million people speak one of the 60 recognised regional or minority languages (European Parliament, 2016). However, there is no data on the use of non-recognised language varieties. Among these, we can distinguish dialects – regional or social varieties of a (dominant) language that differ in pronunciation, vocabulary and/or grammar from other forms of the same language (Trudgill, 2000). In some cases, language varieties may be referred to as 'contested languages'. According to Tamburelli and Tosco, these are "generally listed in international language catalogues and atlases […] but have not attained any reasonable degree of official political recognition by the state within which they are spoken" (Tamburelli & Tosco, 2021, pp. 3–4).

[1] This statement is taken from the Special Eurobarometer 386 (European Commission, 2012) entitled "Europeans and their languages". It should be noted that Eurobarometer data are self-reported and refer to conversational skills in any language (including foreign languages).

From an academic point of view, the boundary between what is called a 'dialect' and what is a 'contested language' is ambiguous. The most frequently cited criterion of mutual intelligibility – a large linguistic distance between this variety and the dominant language – is not always sufficient and can be misleading (Van Rooy, 2020). There are, however, some criteria that may be helpful. Contested languages are distinctly apart linguistically from the official languages of the state in which they are spoken (*Abstand* criterion – a language by distance; Kloss, 1967). However, they are often disregarded because of their genealogical relationship to the official languages of the state. Some of the contested languages are small in terms of the number of speakers, others are quite large. In most cases, however, the intergenerational transmission of these languages is weakening, and in most cases younger speakers prefer to use the state language rather than their community language. Sometimes they have a distinct literary written tradition, and may display some level of standardisation and corpus planning (*Ausbau* criterion – a language by development; Kloss, 1967). Nevertheless, these languages are often referred to in everyday (and often academic) discourse as 'dialects', 'patois', etc. They are not recognised as 'languages' in political terms, or are referred to as 'languages with an adjective': regional, local, our (Dołowy & Mętrak, in press).

The recent "Special Eurobarometer: Europeans and their languages" (European Union, 2024) shows the positive attitude of Europeans towards multilingualism, with 86% of respondents believing that everyone in the EU should speak at least one foreign language (and 69% at least two); 84% of Europeans "support safeguarding regional and minority languages" (European Union, 2024, p. 7). However, the study barely mentions any of the recognised regional or minority languages. Nor is there any mention of other, non-recognised varieties as potentially contributing to Europe's multilingualism.

Against this background, the aim of the study presented here was to investigate the extent to which lay people perceive different types of languages as contributing to the multilingualism of two European countries, namely Poland and Italy. We decided to focus on what we call 'internal multilingualism', i.e. languages and varieties that are indigenous to the country (see below, section 3.3). Among these, there are 'minority languages' – legally recognised (at the internal, state and/or international level, in particular in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages) and 'dialects', as non-recognised varieties, usually of lower linguistic prestige (Chambers & Trudgill, 1998). Our study is therefore situated in the perspective of folk linguistics (Niedzielski & Preston, 2003), which refers to the beliefs, assumptions and opinions about language and its use expressed by lay people. Their perception of different language forms as contributing or not contributing to the multilingualism of the state is thus not based on scientific concepts (what linguists consider languages or dialects) but on dominant top-down and local discourses, ways of talking about such varieties, individual and social attitudes towards them.

Finally, the aim of this study is to know how such 'naïve', popular perceptions of recognised and non-recognised varieties position those forms that can be considered 'contested languages'. We believe that such a study, with its comparative perspective, will bring knowledge about how the recognition of language varieties, and thus their valorisation (Taylor, 1994), affects their perception and – indirectly – people's attitudes towards them.

2 Overview of Linguistic Diversity in Poland and Italy

2.1 Poland

After the Second World War, with the Holocaust of the Jewish population, the change of borders, the expulsion of unwanted groups (mainly Germans, but also other ethnic groups speaking Germanic languages), the expulsion and resettlement of people within the new borders, the new Polish government wanted to make Poland a monocultural and monolingual state. Such a vision was supported by the communist government's policies and actions against minorities and towards linguistic unification (Zielińska, 2013, p. 50). This led to the devaluation of the different language varieties in Poland and to a progressive linguistic assimilation.

After the political changes in 1989, a new attempt to recognise minorities and their languages was made with the Act on National and Ethnic Minorities and Regional Language, adopted in 2005 and reiterated in the European Charter of Regional or Minority Languages, ratified by Poland in 2008. Within the group of

national minorities (with the kin-state), **Belarusians**, **Czechs**, **Lithuanians**, **Germans**, **Armenians**, **Russians**, **Slovaks**, **Ukrainians** and **Jews** have been recognised. Ethnic minorities include **Karaites**, **Lemkos**, **Roma** and **Tatars**. Irrespective of the vitality of the recognised minority languages, the number of speakers, institutional support and status, all these languages received *de jure* the same level of support, which cannot be realised *de facto* (Sobczak & Kakareko, 2022). Poland has also recognised a regional language, **Kashubian**. Other groups, namely the Silesians and, more recently, the Wilamowians, have tried to obtain recognition for their languages, **Silesian** and **Wymysorys**, and an extension of the law, but so far without success.

Due to its geopolitical and economic location, Poland has not been a country of choice for significant numbers of migrants until recently. It was not until Russia's aggression against Ukraine, and in particular the full-scale war that began in 2022, that many migrants from Ukraine arrived in Poland.

On the basis of Art. 27 of the Polish Constitution, Polish is the official language of Poland, which shall not violate the rights of national minorities under ratified international agreements. In the 2021 census, 95.32% of the population declared that they used only Polish at home. This is, on the one hand, the result of language policy in Poland and long-term persecution or humiliation of minorities, while on the other hand it may also be related to the way the national census and the question of languages was constructed, which does not facilitate the choice of other languages, especially those not recognised (Wicherkiewicz, 2024).

These are the contested languages of Poland that have suffered most from Poland's hostile language policy. These unrecognised language varieties, which are mostly collateral to the Polish language (and in the East, language varieties close to Eastern Slavic languages, namely Belarusian and Ukrainian) and are most often perceived as its dialects. Nevertheless, at least a few groups, such as the Silesians, Góral Podhalanians, Podlachians, undertake various activities to protect and develop their languages (Dołowy & Mętrak, in press). In most cases, however, their value is denied by society and politicians. Only recently, in 2024, a new body, the Institute for Linguistic Diversity of Poland, was created within the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. The aim of this institution is to support all the linguistic varieties used in Poland and their speakers, and to increase their status and vitality.

2.2 Italy

Italy's linguistic diversity is a reflection of its rich history, regional identities, and contemporary multiculturalism. The country is home to a multitude of languages, reflecting the varied regional identities and historical influences that have shaped its society. While Italian is the official language and serves as the main communication and expression form at the public and private levels, about thirty minority languages and spoken varieties (often called 'dialects') coexist, of which only twelve are officially recognised.

These languages are protected under national and regional legislation and have varying degrees of legal protection. National Law 482/1999 recognises, among others, the national languages of neighbouring countries, such as **Slovene**, **German**, **Catalan**, and **French**; languages of historical minorities (such as **Occitan**, **Franco–Provençal**, **Griko**, **Arbëresh**, or **Molise Croatian**), and regional languages such as **Ladin** (spoken in parts of Trentino–Alto Adige and Veneto), **Friulian** (spoken in Friuli Venezia Giulia), and **Sardinian** (spoken in Sardinia, with its own internal dialectal variations). Beyond the officially recognised minority languages, Italy has a vast array of **regional varieties**, many of which are considered distinct Romance languages rather than simple variations of Italian. Examples of varieties belonging to this group are **Venetan**, **Lombard**, **Piedmontese**, **Emilian–Romagnol**, **Sicilian**, **Calabrese**, or **Apulian**. According to a 2015 survey of the National Institute for Statistics (Istat – Istituto nazionale di statistica, 2017), 32.2% of Italians alternate between Italian and a dialect or local language, while 14% express themselves exclusively in a local idiom. These latter varieties, either regional varieties of Italian or distinct varieties, are often referred to and described as 'dialects', both in academia (e.g. Loporcaro, 2009; Marcato, 2002) and by lay people. It should be very clear that this term commonly refers to two very different things. Although academia distinguishes between 'dialects of Italian' to refer to local and regional variants of Italian and 'dialects of Italy' to refer to varieties distinct from Italian and not diachronically traceable to it, mostly spoken under diglossia, this distinction is not accepted in common discourse, where both categories of varieties are indifferently

described as 'dialects' (Screti, 2024). This broad and heterogeneous set of language varieties almost totally coincides with the notion of 'contested languages' (cf. Tamburelli & Tosco, 2021, pp. 3–4).

The presence of immigrant communities has introduced additional linguistic diversity to the one described above. As of 1 January 2020, Italy ranked fifth in Europe in terms of the number of foreign residents and fifteenth in terms of the incidence of foreign population. As of 31 December 2020, there were 5,171,894 foreign nationals residing in Italy, accounting for 8.5% of the total population. As a consequence, languages such as Arabic, Romanian, Albanian, and Chinese are spoken in various urban areas, contributing to the multicultural tapestry of contemporary Italian society (Barni & Bagna, 2008). This linguistic pluralism is not only a testament to Italy's historical migration patterns but also to its ongoing role as a destination for global migration.

3 Methodology

3.1 Objectives of the Study

Multilingualism in Poland and Italy is well-documented through official data sources such as censuses and school records. However, little research has explored whether these countries are perceived as multilingual by their inhabitants and, if so, how this perception is shaped and articulated.

The main aim of this study is to investigate the perception of multilingualism in Poland and Italy, and to analyse which language varieties (among other official languages, dialects, minority languages) are considered to contribute to multilingualism.

Additionally, we examine the conceptual distinction between 'dialects' and 'minority languages.' This analysis is conducted from two perspectives: first, to assess whether these categories contribute to a widely accepted notion of multilingualism, and second, to explore which linguistic varieties are classified under these labels in each country. Furthermore, we investigate whether formal recognition of certain linguistic varieties correlates with their inclusion in common perceptions of multilingualism.

To evaluate whether the official recognition of specific linguistic varieties influences their visibility and salience in public consciousness is a key aspect of this research. We hypothesise that language varieties commonly referred to as 'languages' will be more salient in perceptions of multilingualism than those traditionally categorised as 'dialects.' The education system and media in both countries frequently reinforce these distinctions by clearly labelling legally recognised languages while referring to other varieties as 'dialects.' Given that the laws establishing the official recognition of some varieties traditionally referred to as 'dialects' are relatively recent, it is possible that in common perception and usage the recognised varieties have not yet achieved the status of 'languages.' It is also possible that it is precisely because of the formal recognition achieved that varieties legally defined as 'minority languages' are also defined as such by lay people, thus supporting the hypothesis that the presence or absence of formal recognition has an impact on the visibility and salience of varieties in people's metalinguistic consciousness. This is why the analysis leads us to 'contested languages.' By comparing what people perceive as 'dialects' and what varieties they perceive as 'languages,' we draw conclusions about the perception of 'contested languages' and the importance of recognition as such. This study therefore examines whether language classification influences lay people's perceptions of multilingualism and the valorisation of different varieties.

3.2 Research Questions

Based on the objectives outlined above, our study addresses the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: Do people living in Poland and Italy perceive their country as multilingual?

We then wanted to find out how the concept of multilingualism is constructed in the public mind by looking at which languages are perceived as contributing to multilingualism. We asked:

RQ2: Which languages or language varieties contribute to such 'naïve' perception of multilingualism?

The next step was to see if there was a difference in the perception of multilingualism according to the type of language variety. Our question was:

RQ3: How do 'dialects' and 'minority languages' differ in their contribution to the concept of multilingualism?

The way lay people classify different language categories may be different from the way linguists would categorise them. So we wanted to know:

RQ4: What do respondents mean by 'dialect' and 'minority language,' and to which linguistic varieties do they apply these terms?

Lastly, if there is a difference between the perception of 'dialects' and 'minority languages' as contributing to multilingualism, what does this tell us about the 'contested languages':

RQ5: To what extent do unrecognised varieties ('contested languages') influence perceptions of multilingualism?

To explore these questions, we used a qualitative questionnaire, as it allows for in-depth and subjective insights (not limited to multiple-choice answers) into people's perceptions and beliefs (Denscombe, 2003; Dorer, 2021). As we wanted to capture which varieties were perceived as contributing, in various proportions, to the multilingualism of the country, and which varieties people associated with 'dialects' and 'languages,' providing them with a list would have influenced their thought processes and introduced researcher bias. The qualitative questionnaires allowed participants to articulate their own understanding of different language categories without direct prompting. Finally, it allowed us to draw conclusions about 'contested languages' even though we did not ask about them directly in our questionnaire.

3.3 Research Design

The questionnaire comprises two sections. The first section collects demographic information, including age, gender, place of birth and residence (categorised by population size), and educational background. Additionally, we inquire about respondents' involvement in language-related issues (e.g. professional, educational, activist, or personal engagement), as this factor is expected to influence their perceptions.

The second section consists of five closed questions. The first question asked whether respondents consider Poland/Italy a multilingual country. There are only two possible answers, Yes and No. The remaining four closed questions use a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from "Strongly agree" to "Strongly disagree") to assess perceptions of different varieties as contributing to the multilingualism of a country, namely: languages of other European countries, dialects, languages of migrants and minority languages.

Each closed question is followed by an open-ended question, prompting respondents to provide specific examples. This approach ensures that responses reflect respondents' own conceptual frameworks rather than predefined categories.

Based on the collected responses, we distinguish between two primary conceptualisations of multilingualism:

1. External multilingualism, defined by the presence of foreign languages (e.g., languages of neighbouring countries and immigrant communities).
2. Internal multilingualism, characterised by indigenous linguistic varieties (e.g., dialects and minority languages).

This study focuses on 'internal multilingualism' only. The final open-ended question asks respondents to identify languages that receive special legal recognition in their country.

3.4 Data Collection and Participants

The questionnaire was developed in two parallel language versions: Polish for respondents from Poland and Italian for respondents from Italy. Despite the many caveats we were aware of (such as the networking of respondents), we decided to conduct the survey exclusively online. We used the KOBO application (www.kobotoolbox.org) and conducted the survey between November and December 2022. Distribution relied on social media platforms.

A total of 202 responses were collected in Italy and 159 responses in Poland. The demographic characteristics of respondents in both countries were relatively similar:

- Poland: 69% female, 30% male; 93% had a higher education degree; 86% were between 26 and 65 years old. The majority resided in the Mazovia region (23%), Silesia (11%), and Lesser and Greater Poland (9%). Approximately 69% were involved in language-related issues.
- Italy: 58% female, 41% male; 83% had a higher education degree; 62% were between 26 and 65 years old. Respondents were predominantly from Tuscany (28%), Lombardy (12%), and Piedmont (7%). Approximately 73% had some involvement in language-related issues.

Given the survey's online distribution, the sample is not representative of the general population. Respondents were predominantly well-educated and engaged in linguistic matters. Age, gender, place of birth and place of residence were not considered statistically significant for this study. However, the data remains valuable for understanding the perceptions of multilingualism among this demographic group.

3.5 Methodological Approach to Data Analysis

The collected data, digitised in the KOBO application, were subjected to statistical analysis using the R statistical environment (R Core Team, 2023). In the analyses carried out, we followed three general approaches to the treatment of the data. Firstly, in the case of the closed questions, the responses to each question in the questionnaire were analysed by country, separately for Poland and Italy. Secondly, we looked at how the answers were distributed according to the answer to the first question (on whether Poland/Italy were multilingual countries). Finally, for open-ended responses, we conducted a frequency analysis, identifying linguistic varieties mentioned more than ten times across responses. This approach allowed us to assess which languages or varieties were most salient in participants' conceptualisations of multilingualism.

4 Results

Multilingualism Figures 1 and 2 show the general perception of multilingualism in Poland and Italy.

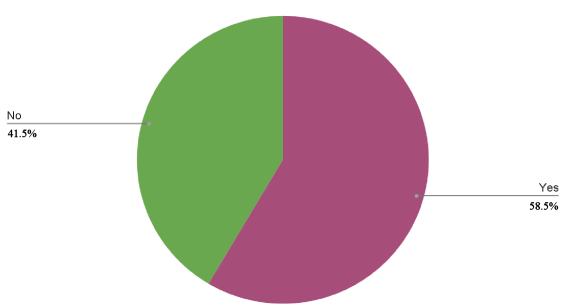


Figure 1. Is Poland a multilingual country?

We decided not to offer any answers other than Yes/No. The question of multilingualism is so difficult, and the answer depends on so many factors, that we were afraid of getting mostly "I don't know / Hard to say" answers. Meanwhile, our aim was to see how different types of languages are perceived by people against the background of the general perception of the multilingualism of the given country.

The results are similar in both countries, with Poland being perceived as multilingual by 10 percentage points fewer respondents than Italy. In Poland the results were around 40% for "No" to 60% for "Yes"; in Italy, 30% and 70%, respectively.

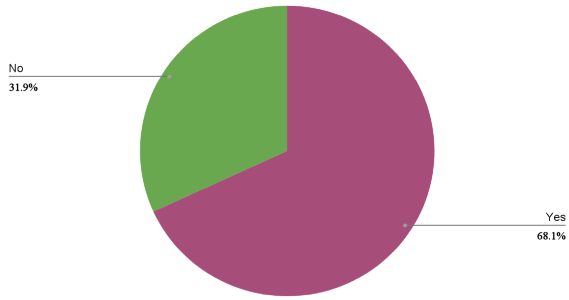


Figure 2. Is Italy a multilingual country?

4.1 Impact of 'Dialects' on Multilingualism

Figures 3 and 4 show the responses to the question about the contribution of 'dialects' to multilingualism in Poland and Italy, respectively. In the tables below, responses are presented first for all those who answered the previous question regarding the country's multilingualism (column "Total") and then separately according to whether participants answered negatively (column "No") or positively (column "Yes") to the previous question.

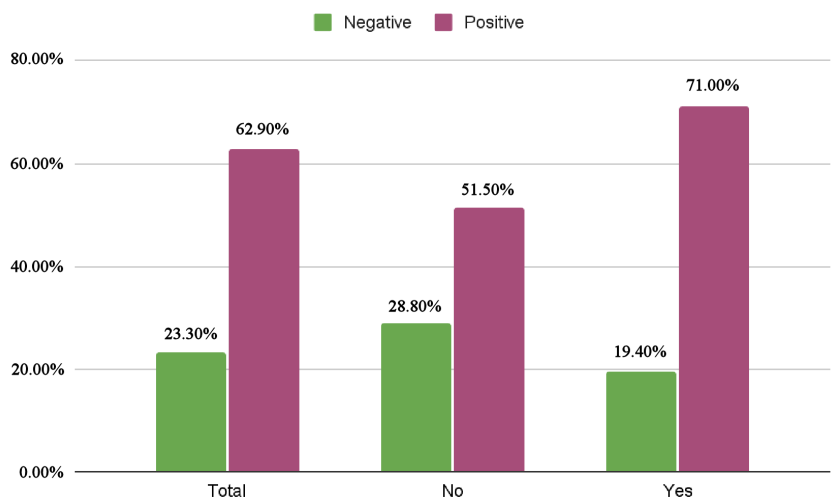


Figure 3. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "Dialects contribute to the multilingualism of Poland"?

The majority of survey participants consider 'dialects' to be a component of the multilingualism of the two countries (68.7% in Italy, 62.90% in Poland). The proportion increases considerably among those who responded positively to the question about the country's multilingualism ("Yes" columns) and still remains above 50% even among those who do not consider the country multilingual ("No" columns).

Again, the results are generally similar in both countries, but slightly more positive in Italy.

The Popular Notion of 'Dialect' In order to draw a map of the common or intuitive notion of 'dialect' by people in Poland and Italy, we then introduced an open-ended question in the questionnaire asking them to name some examples of 'dialects.' The responses obtained referred to 99 different varieties in total, 37 for

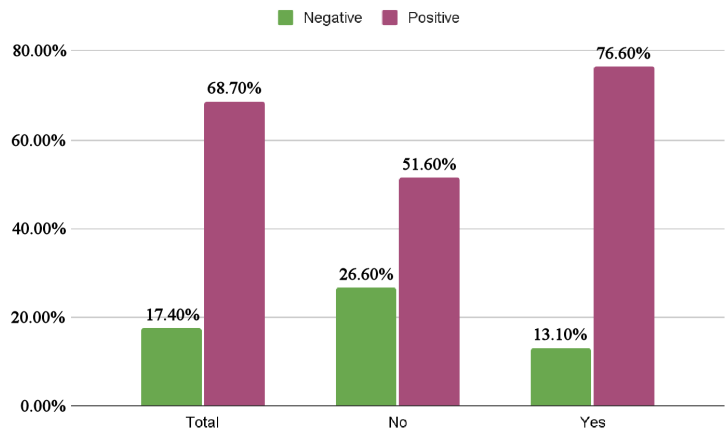


Figure 4. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "Dialects contribute to the multilingualism of Italy"?

Polish participants and 62 for Italian participants. Figures 5 and 6 focus on the varieties mentioned by more than ten different respondents in total.

'Contested languages' (unrecognised varieties that fulfil the distance and/or development conditions to be considered as 'languages') are shown in dark green, and the languages recognised by the state (minority languages) are in purple. Light green denotes language varieties different from the two previous categories.

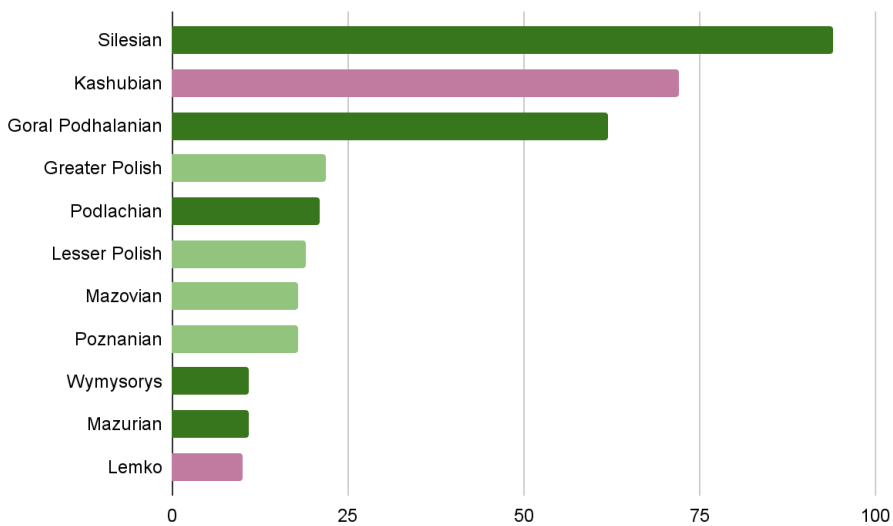


Figure 5. Different types of language varieties, referred to by respondents in Poland as 'dialects'.

Of the 11 varieties mentioned more than 10 times by Polish respondents (Figure 5), Silesian, Kashubian and Goral Podhalanian stand out. These are the three most frequently mentioned. In summary, five varieties referred to as 'dialects' can be classified as 'contested languages' (although classical Polish dialectology does not consider them to be 'languages'), four are in fact dialects, and two are recognised as regional (Kashubian) or minority languages (namely Lemko, a language of a recognised ethnic minority in Poland, which is not a West Slavic language like Polish, but an East Slavic language).

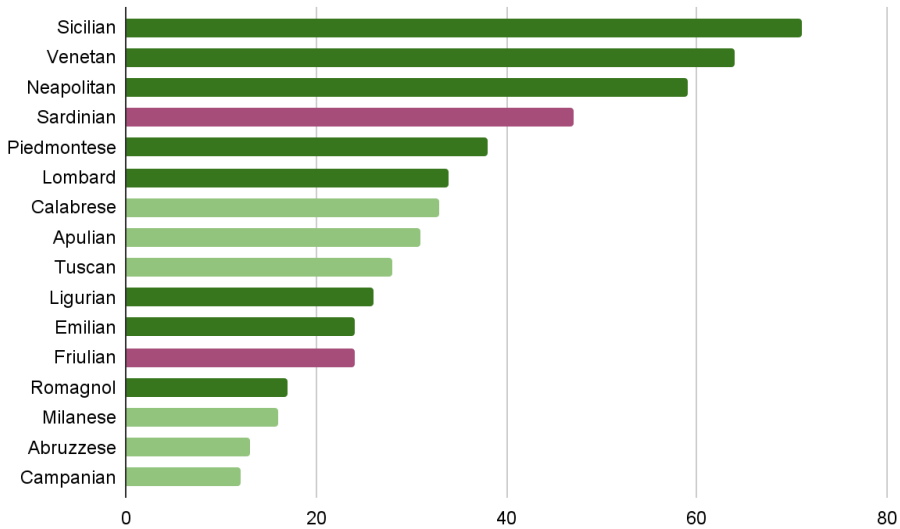


Figure 6. Different types of language varieties, referred to by respondents in Italy as 'dialects'.

Regarding the Italian component, the same question captures 62 different varieties in total, 16 of which were mentioned more than 10 times (Figure 6). Of the named varieties, only Sardinian and Friulian are languages formally recognised by the Italian state as minority languages. All other labels trace the administrative division of Italy into regions, making explicit a fairly widespread view that each region has a specific variety (see Section 5 for a more detailed discussion).[2] Eight out of 16 varieties described as 'dialects' are also classified as 'contested languages'.

4.2 Impact of 'Minority Languages' on Multilingualism

Figures 7 and 8 show the responses to the question about the contribution of 'minority languages' to multilingualism in Poland and Italy, respectively. As before, the answers are shown separately for those who said that the country was multilingual and for those who said it was not.

In a similar way to what is noted above for 'dialects', the majority of survey participants consider 'minority languages' to be constitutive factors of multilingualism in the two countries (71% in Poland, 65% in Italy). As in the previous case (Figures 3 and 4), the general perception of a country as multilingual influences the positive perception of 'minority languages' as components of the country's multilingualism (Poland 74%, Italy 77%).

The Popular Notion of 'Minority Language' Similarly to the label 'dialect,' participants from the two countries were asked to exemplify the notion of 'minority language.'

In Poland, respondents mentioned 30 different varieties as 'minority languages,' of which 13 were mentioned more than 10 times. Interestingly, 11 of them are actually recognised by Polish law, based on the 2005 Act on National and Ethnic Minorities and Regional Languages. Ten of them (marked in dark pink) have the status of 'minority languages' (German, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Lemko, Lithuanian, Romani, Russian, Czech, Yiddish, Karaim) and Kashubian is recognised as a 'regional language.' Only two, Silesian and Wymysorys, are not recognised in Poland and can be described as 'contested languages' (see Discussion in Section 5).

[2] The labels 'Milanese' and 'Neapolitan' formally refer to the metropolitan cities of Milan and Naples, respectively. However, in everyday, non-specialist usage, they are commonly employed not only to denote the local varieties spoken in the two cities, but also more broadly to refer to the wider set of regional varieties spoken throughout Lombardy and Campania.

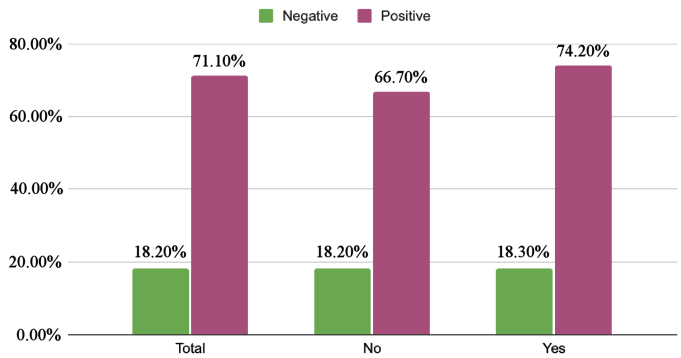


Figure 7. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "Minority languages contribute to the multilingualism of Poland"?

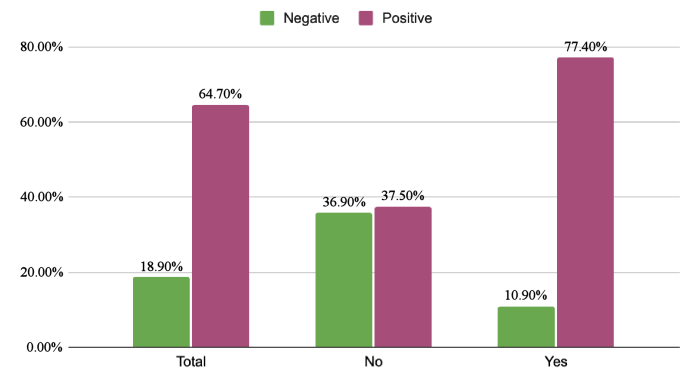


Figure 8. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "Minority languages contribute to the multilingualism of Italy"?

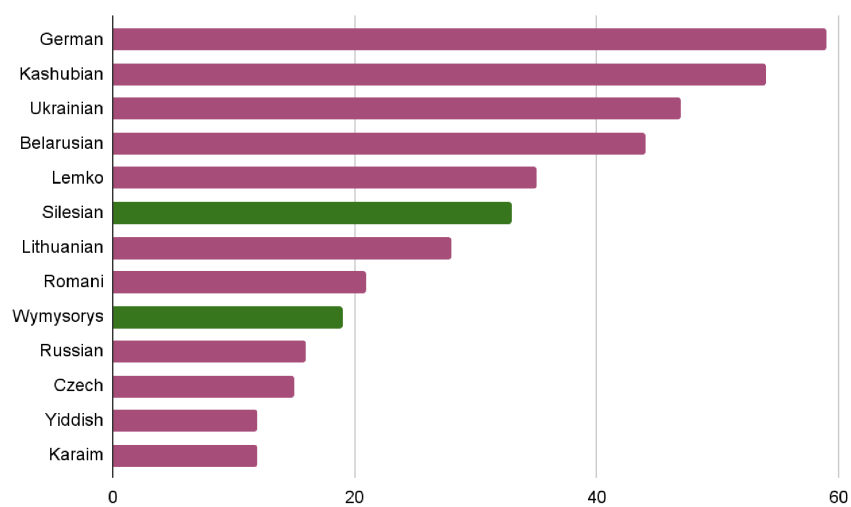


Figure 9. Different types of language varieties, referred to by respondents in Poland as 'minority languages'.

According to Italian participants, the popular semantics of the term ‘minority language’ identifies 60 different varieties in total, 17 of which recur more than 10 times. Figure 10 illustrates them.

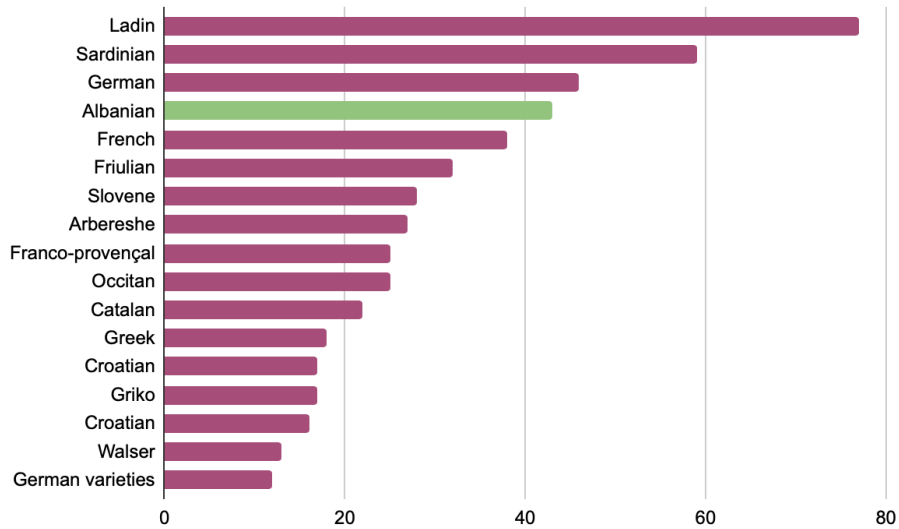


Figure 10. Different types of language varieties, referred to by respondents in Italy as ‘minority languages’.

The first thing one notices is that all of the varieties mentioned belong to the category ‘minority language’ as defined by Law 482/92 of the Italian state. The only exception (in green) is Albanian, although it is not possible to tell from the responses whether this name refers to the variant spoken in Albania and present in Italy as a language of immigration, or to the historical variety of Albanian, more appropriately called ‘Arbëreshë’.

4.3 ‘Dialect’ or ‘Minority Language’?

From what has been presented up to this point, we can see how certain varieties are referred to as both ‘dialect’ and ‘minority language’ in both Poland and Italy. This is the case, for example, with Kashubian, Silesian, Sardinian, or Sicilian. It is unlikely that the distribution in one or the other category is random, and that varieties are indifferently named in one or the other way. A scoring analysis of the collected responses (i.e., the varieties mentioned as belonging to either category) makes it possible to see whether some trend can be discerned, or whether the naming is random. In other words, are there varieties that tend to be named ‘dialects’ more frequently than they are named ‘minority languages’ and vice versa? Is it possible, then, to identify varieties for which one category is more salient than the other in people’s perceptions? Figures 11 and 12 show the respective frequency of labelling for each of the languages named both as ‘dialect’ and as ‘minority language’.

In the case of three varieties, Kashubian, Silesian and Wymysorys, there are both types of classification: as ‘dialects’ and as ‘minority languages.’ Although the number of answers differs (Silesian and Kashubian are more often mentioned as ‘dialects,’ whereas Wymysorys – which is Germanic, not Slavic, and therefore does not belong to the same group as the dominant Polish language – is more often mentioned as a ‘language’), this confusion is clearly visible. To a lesser extent, it also affects Lemko. There is less confusion about the classification of other varieties: Ukrainian, Belarusian and Romani (languages of recognised minorities in Poland) are mainly referred to as ‘minority languages,’ and Goral Podhalanian, Podlachian, Mazurian and Greater Polish – as ‘dialects’.

In the Italian context, we notice a clear polarisation: some varieties tend to be called almost exclusively ‘minority languages’ and others almost exclusively ‘dialects’. To the first group belong varieties such as

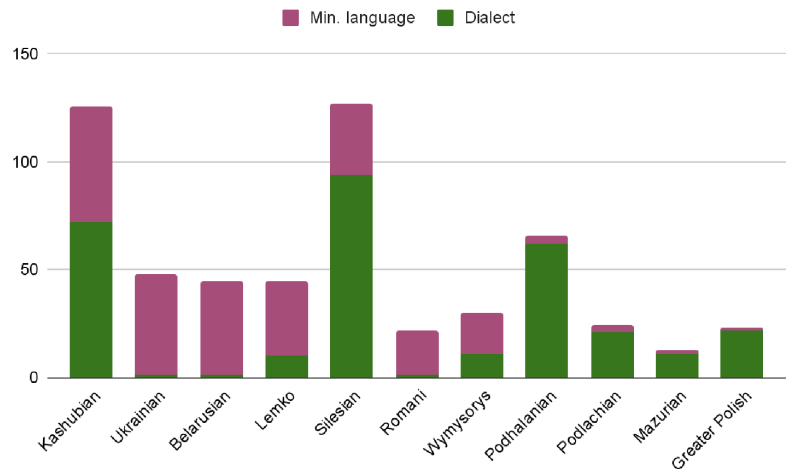


Figure 11. Distribution of categorisation as 'dialect' or 'minority language' of varieties identified as belonging to both categories in Poland.

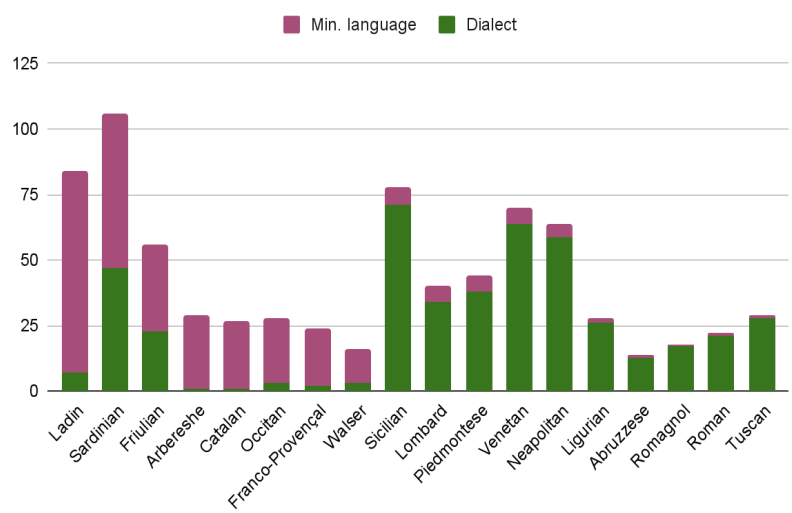


Figure 12. Distribution of categorisation as 'dialect' or 'minority language' of varieties identified as belonging to both categories in Italy.

Ladin, Sardinian, Friulian, Arbëreshë, Catalan, Occitan, Franco–Provençal and Walser. At the opposite end of the scale we find varieties that are instead referred to almost exclusively as 'dialects': Sicilian, Lombard, Piedmontese, Venetan, Neapolitan, Ligurian, Abruzzese, Romagnol, Roman and Tuscan.

4.4 Relative Weight of 'Dialects' and 'Minority Languages' in Perceived Multilingualism of Poland and Italy

What is the respective weight of 'dialects' and 'minority languages' in the perception of a country as multilingual? To reply to this question, we grouped the responses described in the previous sections (4.2 and 4.3) and divided them into three groups: a) those who responded that neither 'dialects' nor 'minority languages' contribute to a country's multilingualism, b) those who responded that both 'dialects' and 'minority languages' contribute to multilingualism, and c) those who responded that only 'dialects' or only 'minority languages' contribute to a country's multilingualism.

Each of these three groups is then further divided between (1) those who consider their country multilingual and (2) those who do not believe that their country is multilingual. Figures 13 and 14 present the data for Poland and Italy, respectively.

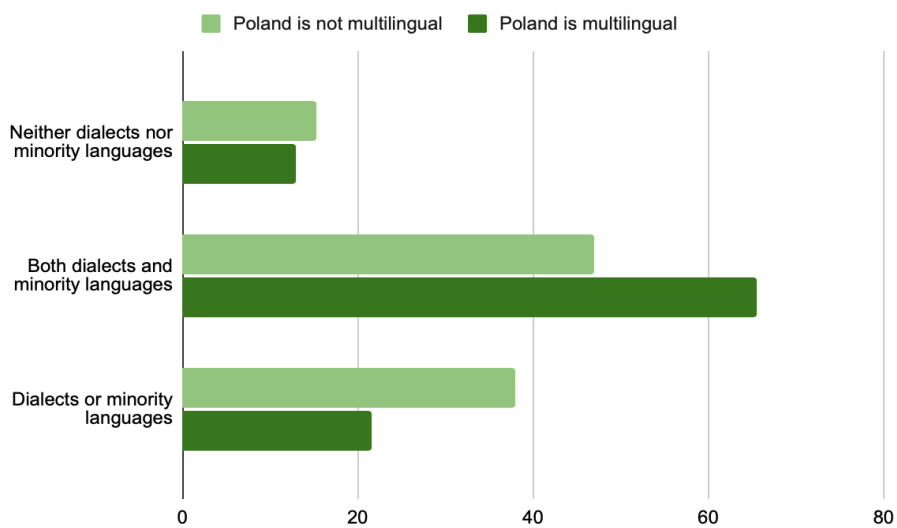


Figure 13. Perception of the relationship between 'dialects' / 'minority languages' and multilingualism in Poland.

First, we see that in both countries the majority of replies belong to group (b), that is, those who think that both 'dialects' and 'minority languages' are an important component of the country's multilingualism, followed by groups (c) and (a), respectively.

If we look at the responses of those who consider the two countries to be multilingual (darker bars), we see that the results are quite similar for groups (b) and (c), while for group (a), i.e., those who believe that neither 'dialects' nor 'minority languages' contribute to the multilingualism of the country, the proportion of respondents from Italy is lower (Italy – 12.9%; Poland – 19.4%). The biggest differences between the two countries appear among those who think the country is not multilingual: in Poland, the number of those who belong to group (b) is greater than those who belong to group (c), while the opposite situation exists for Italy. In other words, 47% of research participants from Poland and 28.1% of those from Italy think that both 'dialects' and 'minority languages' contribute to the country's multilingualism. In contrast, the percentage of people who think that only one of the two types of varieties contributes to the country's multilingualism drops to 37.9% for Poland and rises to 56.2% for Italy.

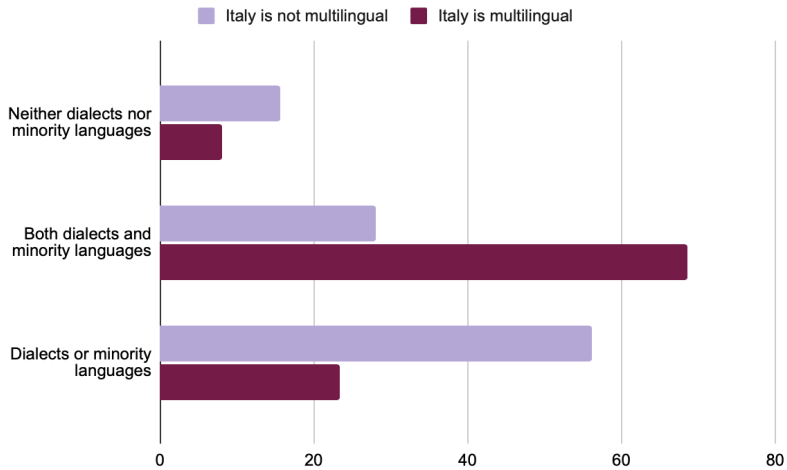


Figure 14. Perception of the relationship between 'dialects' / 'minority languages' and multilingualism in Italy.

This difference, in a scenario of rather similar results between the two countries, deserves more attention. For this reason, we analysed the data by taking the two categories of 'dialects' and 'minority languages' under consideration separately.

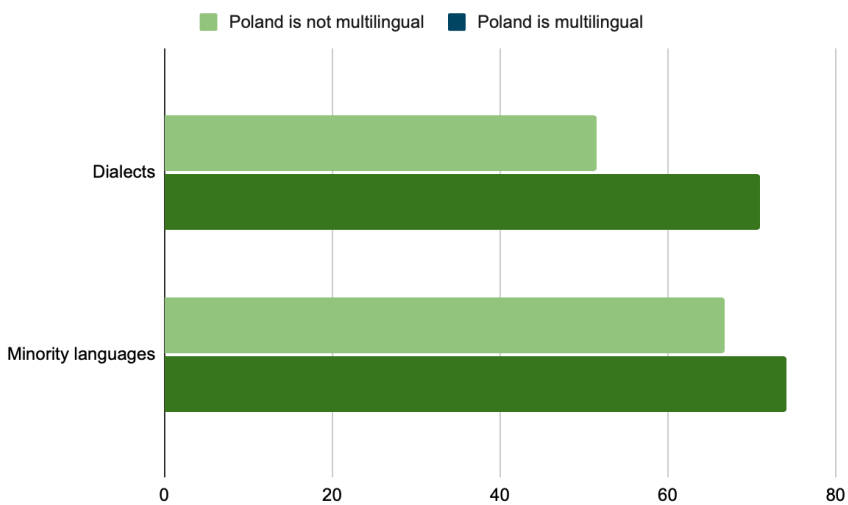


Figure 15. Relative weight of 'dialects' and 'minority languages' in perceived multilingualism in Poland.

Figures 15 and 16 clearly show that there is no substantial difference between the two countries in the role attributed to 'dialects' and 'minority languages' for those who regard the two countries as multilingual. However, among those who do not recognise the multilingualism of the countries (lighter bars), 'minority languages' are slightly favoured over 'dialects' for Poland, while the reverse holds true for Italy.

In Poland, 66.7% still see 'minority languages' as contributing to Poland's multilingualism (which is about 15 percentage points more than in the case of 'dialects'). In Italy, on the other hand, only 37.5% of respondents consider that 'minority languages' contribute to the multilingualism of Italy (which is 14 percentage points less than in the case of 'dialects').

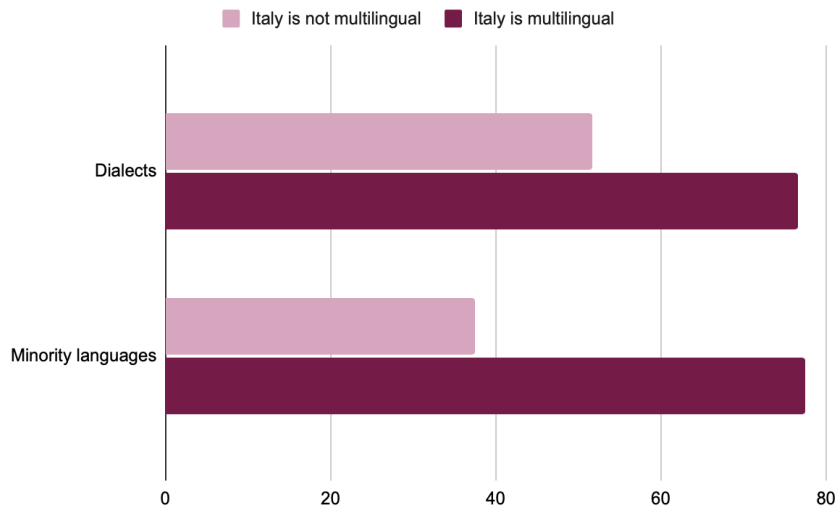


Figure 16. Relative weight of 'dialects' and 'minority languages' in perceived multilingualism in Italy.

5 Discussion

In both Poland and Italy, more than half of the respondents consider their country to be multilingual (**RQ1**).[3] The greater evidence of this figure in Italy compared to Poland can be explained by the habit of Italian public opinion, formed already during the schooling period, to include some minority languages. Italy is a historically multilingual country, exposed to strong migratory currents and generically considered 'open' to the use of different languages (English, for example, is widely used in the media): this, combined with the widespread awareness of the existence of bilingual administrative regions, such as Alto Adige, Valle d'Aosta and Friuli–Venezia–Giulia can be invoked as an explanation for the net position in favor of multilingualism. Meanwhile, Poland is most often described as a monolingual country. The role of language varieties found in different regions was reduced to a minimum during the communist era. Also, migration to Poland, although significantly higher in recent years (especially in the context of Russia's full-scale aggression in Ukraine), is not as pronounced as in Western European countries. Despite this, a clear majority of respondents consider the country to be multilingual.

However, a significant percentage of respondents in both countries do not perceive their country as multilingual (Figures 1 and 2). Interestingly, many of those who do not explicitly consider their country to be multilingual acknowledge the existence of different forms of multilingualism within it (Figures 3, 4, 7, and 8). This suggests that the concept of a multilingual country is not necessarily equivalent to the recognition that different languages and language varieties are used within the country. Therefore, it is particularly interesting to examine and understand the nature of this multilingualism.

We therefore attempted to break down the spontaneous notion of multilingualism into its constituent factors, trying to understand what types or categories of language varieties represent its constituent elements. As already explained in Section 3.3, we considered four categories in our study, two called 'external' (languages of other European countries and languages of migrants) and two 'internal' (dialects and minority languages). For the purposes of this article, we have concentrated only on indigenous varieties, i.e. 'internal multilingualism', although the external component, represented by the so-called 'foreign languages' or languages that are not indigenous but present in the territory as a result of migration flows, is also considerable.

[3] It is important to note that, given the composition of the respondent sample, this study is not representative of the general population. Consequently, both the discussion and the conclusions pertain specifically to the folk linguistic perceptions of a particular group of well-educated individuals with a marked interest in language-related matters.

The data presented in Section 4 indicate that people perceive different types of languages as contributing unequally to the multilingualism of their country. In the survey, we identified two primary categories of languages indigenous to the country: 'dialects' and 'minority languages'. We found that, regardless of whether respondents considered their country multilingual, the majority confirmed that both types contribute to multilingualism. However, the extent of this contribution varies between the two categories and between Poland and Italy, although the proportions are similar (**RQ2** and **RQ3**).

As a first remark, it appears that perceiving a country as multilingual positively influences the perception of 'dialects' as contributing to multilingualism (Poland 71%, Italy 76.6%, cf. Section 4.2). Interestingly, for those who do not consider their country to be multilingual, the results are almost the same in both countries. We can also say that the perception of a country as not multilingual does not mean that 'dialects' are perceived as not contributing to multilingualism (in both countries more than 50% answered positively), and that those who do not consider 'dialects' to be components of multilingualism are a minority, more pronounced – as is to be expected – in the group of those who do not consider the country multilingual.

Similarly, 'minority languages' are considered components of the multilingualism of the two countries, in a higher proportion (71%) for Polish participants than for Italian participants (65%). For the former, it is also noteworthy that the proportion is identical to that found for responses regarding the label 'dialect.' In contrast, Italian participants on average put 'dialects' before 'minority languages' as constituents of the country's multilingualism. In a similar way to the findings for the label 'dialect,' in the case of Polish participants, having answered negatively to the question about the country's multilingualism does not prevent them from perceiving the role of 'minority languages' (67% positive responses). It is noteworthy that this is not true for Italian participants, where positive responses from those who do not consider the country multilingual are quite low (37%). In this, the Italian portion of the sample differs significantly from the Polish portion.

These elements, along with those that follow, lead us to formulate some considerations. In Italy, 'dialects' play a significant role, both among those who recognise multilingualism and those who do not believe in it (>50%), whereas in Poland, their relevance is lower. Furthermore, in Italy 'dialects' are more prominent than 'minority languages', while the opposite is observed in Poland. 'Minority languages' in Italy are particularly salient for those who perceive the country as multilingual but are less so for those who do not. This suggests that the concept of multilingualism is more complex and multifaceted among individuals who are familiar with the notion of 'minority languages'.

Since our study investigates 'naïve' perceptions of multilingualism, we gathered the most valuable insights by asking respondents to list the specific languages they consider 'dialects' and those they classify as 'minority languages' (**RQ4**). We then compared these languages to explore how their perceived importance for a country's multilingualism relates to language recognition. To address our final research question (**RQ5**), we analyse the Polish and Italian cases separately.

In Poland, there is a clear pattern in recognizing different varieties as 'dialects' or 'minority languages'. The three varieties most frequently classified as 'dialects' (Figure 5) – Silesian, Kashubian, and Goral Podhalanian – fall into different linguistic categories. Silesian, most frequently mentioned as a 'dialect' by respondents, lacks official status for political reasons, despite active efforts for recognition. Kashubian, which ranks second, is officially recognised as a 'regional language' under Polish law and the ECRML. The third variety, Goral Podhalanian, lacks recognition, and its community neither seeks nor supports it. However, it holds a strong cultural presence in Polish literature and folklore, making it one of the most well-known language varieties in Poland. All these three cases align with Tamburelli and Tosco's (2021) definition of 'contested languages' (see Dołowy & Mętrak, in press).

Other less frequently mentioned 'dialect' varieties also fall into the 'contested languages' category. Podlachian has recently gained visibility in publications and social media, though dialectologists dispute its linguistic completeness, citing internal variation (Mazur, 2001). Wymysorys, Poland's smallest language, benefits from institutional support (e.g., from the University of Warsaw) but struggles for official recognition (Olko & Bilewicz, 2022). Mazurian, nearly extinct due to post-WWII persecution and displacement of its speakers, is classified by dialectologists as a Polish sub-dialect (Mazur, 2001).

Several varieties classified as 'dialects' are associated with specific Polish regions: Wielkopolski (Greater Polish, including the 'Poznanian' variety spoken in Poznań), Małopolski (Lesser Polish), and Mazovian

(mentioned less frequently). While these language varieties have never sought official recognition, they are widely regarded as Poland's most vibrant dialects.

Comparing these with varieties identified as 'minority languages' (Figure 9), we find that, among the 10 most frequently mentioned, only two – Silesian and Wymysorys – lack official recognition, confirming their status as 'contested languages'. This suggests strong public awareness of respondents of which languages hold minority status and that linguistic and cultural distinction, broad domain usage, and progress in emancipation movements increase the likelihood of a variety being perceived as a 'language'. Consequently, 'contested languages' are often perceived as 'languages' (**RQ5**).

An analysis of varieties classified as both 'minority languages' and 'dialects' (Figure 11) reveals unique cases in Poland. Kashubian, more frequently labeled a 'dialect' than a 'minority language', illustrates the ambiguity of its status as a 'regional language'. Although officially recognised as a 'language', it does not hold true always for lay people who often perceive it as a 'dialect'. This means that the 'regional' qualifier implies its lower status, as it is often seen as an intermediate category, a 'language with an adjective', (Dołowy & Mętrak, in press) along with Kashubian activists' views (Jabłoński, 2020).

Silesian and Wymysorys, classified as both 'dialects' and 'minority languages,' reflect two interpretations. First, respondents acknowledge their contested status and the state's refusal to recognise them while still viewing them as legitimate languages. Second, given the active campaigns for recognition and the public debates surrounding them, their inclusion in both categories may signal advocacy for their official recognition.

The case of Lemko, a recognised language of the ethnic minority in Poland, also warrants attention. Its classification as both a 'dialect' and a 'minority language' may stem from the ambiguous status of the Lemko community itself. In Poland, only kin-state groups are classified as 'national minorities', while indigenous groups fall under 'ethnic minorities'. Awareness of ethnic minorities is generally lower since they are not associated with a specific nation-state. As a result, the Lemko group remains relatively unknown, leading to its perception as either a Polish dialect or a Ukrainian variety.

For all other cases, overlap between the classifications of 'dialect' and 'minority language' is minimal. Officially recognised minority languages are predominantly perceived as such, while non-recognised varieties are primarily categorised as 'dialects'.

As far as Italy is concerned for the classification of 'dialects', the survey intercepts varieties belonging mostly to the category of 'contested languages'. However, a clarification on popular terminology is necessary at this point. The increasingly widespread view in academia is that the varieties traditionally referred to as 'dialects' are for all intents and purposes languages quite distinct from so-called standard Italian, which evolved primarily from the Tuscan variant (Grassi, 1978; Loporcaro, 2009; Maiden & Parry, 1997; Marcato, 2002). Nonetheless, much of the academic tradition continues to use the term 'dialect,' albeit with the clarification that these are not dialects 'of Italian' but dialects 'of Italy', understood as language varieties used in a manner functionally subordinate to Italian. This ambiguity in the use of the term 'dialect' has enforced a permanence, in everyday language, of the use of the term to refer both to regional variants of Italian (for example, the Italian spoken in Abruzzo or Calabria) or to indigenous language varieties, also traditionally referred to as 'dialects' and described with the same regional-administrative-based labels. For this reason, when a person in Italy speaks of Piedmontese or Neapolitan as a dialect, he or she could be referring to the Piedmont or Naples variants of Italian or to the Piedmontese or Neapolitan languages, well distinct from Italian on phonological, morpho–syntactic and lexical grounds. In view of this, the most probable hypothesis is that the labels used by the survey participants and shown in the table all describe, with varying degrees of approximation and different correspondence with the view provided by dialectology, language varieties distinct from Italian. Among them, Sicilian, Venetan, Neapolitan, Piedmontese, Lombard, Ligurian, Emilian, and Romagnol also belong to the category of 'contested languages,' that is, languages for which official recognition has been or is being sought and which have, to varying degrees, standardised orthographies, linguistic and educational resources, and organised activism that responds to social needs for cultural recognition and linguistic preservation. The situation is thus similar to that described for the varieties of Poland: the term 'dialect' is associated preeminently with contested languages, but also with minority languages and – to a limited extent – with actual dialects.

Turning to an analysis of the varieties identified spontaneously as 'minority languages' in Italy (Figure 10), it is striking how all the most frequently named varieties are actually minority languages in the technical sense of the term, i.e., that of languages protected by law under this heading. Clearly, the notion of a 'minority language' is a specialised notion that determines a full awareness of the applicability of the term. Similar to the observation above for Poland, this finding suggests that there is also a strong awareness in Italy of languages that enjoy official recognition.

As commented above in Section 4.4, the survey responses from Italy show a clear polarisation: some varieties tend to be called almost exclusively 'minority languages' and others almost exclusively 'dialects.' To the first group belong varieties such as Ladin, Sardinian, Friulian, Arbëreshë, Catalan, Occitan, Franco–Provençal and Walser. Interestingly, all these varieties belong to the set of officially recognised varieties under National Law No. 482/1999. At the opposite end of the scale we find varieties that are instead referred to almost exclusively as 'dialects': Sicilian, Lombard, Piedmontese, Venetan, Neapolitan, Ligurian, Abruzzese, Romagnol, Roman and Tuscan. With the exception of Roman and Tuscan, which belong more properly to the category of dialects in the sense of variants of the Italian language, all the other varieties mentioned fall fully within the definition of 'contested languages.'

It is then interesting to comment on the results for Ladin, Sardinian, and Friulian, which are the three most mentioned varieties overall and which, although they are mainly defined as 'minority languages,' have a higher percentage of designation as 'dialect' than the other varieties on the left side of the graph. In fact, these three varieties share three characteristics that can be related to the greater salience of the category 'dialect' for their classification: first, their typological proximity to the Italian language is greater than, for example, Arbëreshë and Walser (but not compared to Catalan, Occitan, and Franco–Provençal); second, they are varieties spoken exclusively on Italian territory, and therefore not associated with the linguistic heritage of neighbouring countries (an aspect that likely tends to elevate their social prestige); third, they are all varieties that have been commonly and exclusively referred to as 'dialects' until the enactment of Law 488/1999, which enshrined their status as a minority language. It is our belief that it is primarily this change in status that has positively influenced the shift in categorisation for these languages from 'dialect' to 'minority language.'

Taking the results for Poland and Italy together, our findings indicate that individuals who recognise Poland and Italy as multilingual possess a clear understanding of what constitutes a minority language. They perceive both dialects (as unrecognised linguistic varieties) and minority languages (as recognised varieties) as integral components of multilingualism, suggesting that any form of linguistic diversity is significant to them. This perspective may also reflect an awareness that linguistic recognition is often a political rather than a purely linguistic process.

While there is little variation between Poland and Italy among those who do recognise their respective countries as multilingual, as these individuals tend to ascribe equal importance to 'dialects' and 'minority languages', the key distinction between the two countries lies in the attitudes of those who do not perceive the country as multilingual, revealing different underlying sociolinguistic dynamics in Poland and Italy. In Italy, there is greater familiarity with dialects, while in Poland, two key patterns can be observed: (1) individuals generally demonstrate a stronger inclination to recognise both 'dialects' and 'minority languages' as contributing to multilingualism compared to their Italian counterparts – an observation that may be linked to Poland's broader societal perception as a monolingual country; and (2) 'minority languages' are acknowledged more frequently than 'dialects', potentially indicating a stronger institutional position, greater societal familiarity, or the perception that dialects, as non-standardised varieties, contribute less to multilingualism.

The data collected allow us to conclude that the greater the awareness of the country's multilingualism, the greater the equality between the categories 'dialect' and 'minority language.' Less awareness of the country's multilingualism correlates with greater rigidity in the distinction between 'dialects' and 'minority languages'. It is also evident how, in the group of people who deny the country's multilingualism, the two categories 'dialect' and 'minority language' are differently salient, with the former prevailing in Italy and the latter in Poland.

Finally, the aim of this study is to know how such 'naïve', popular perceptions of recognised and non-recognised varieties position these forms that can be considered as contested languages. From our data, it

appears that contested varieties represent the majority of non-recognised varieties, and tend to associate strongly with a conceptualisation as 'dialects', a term that far from being neutral, is ambiguous and ideologically marked. Therefore, even in common understanding they are denied the status of 'language' that is instead spontaneously and massively attributed to officially recognised varieties. Given the role of the press in perpetuating this conceptualisation (cf. Screti, 2024, p. 8), an alignment between the social perception of contested varieties with their contestedness status is a finding that one would expect.

6 Conclusion

The data presented in our research indicate that (a) there is a widespread and shared perception of both countries as multilingual, and (b) 'internal multilingualism' is attributed to regional languages, minority languages, and dialects. Furthermore, the significant role played by what people consider 'dialects' is evident. The analysis of the notion of 'dialect,' conducted through the naming exercise required, reveals that the varieties identified as such largely coincide with those classified as 'contested languages'. It is therefore reasonable to deduce that 'contested languages' contribute to the common, popular notion of multilingualism, reinforcing their 'languageness,' which is otherwise undermined at the media level. It emerges also that official recognition can trigger a virtuous cycle whereby these varieties, previously labeled as 'dialects', gain greater prestige in the public eye as a result of recognition: they cease to be classified as 'dialects' and are increasingly regarded as 'languages'.

The survey shown here was not representative, as most respondents were certainly better educated and more aware of language issues than the average person living in Poland or Italy. However, the way people perceive and think about multilingualism and its components says a lot about the way language policy is conducted (including the recognition of some varieties as minority languages and the denial of this right to other varieties) and about the importance of recognising and valorising different language varieties. Therefore, the next step should be to extend such research on the perceptions of multilingualism to a representative sample in order to find correlations with other factors that affect it.

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