The Friulian Language: Identity, Migration, Culture.
Edited by Rosa Mucignat.
197 pages.

This collection of essays has its origin in a conference, “The Friulian Language and Its Contexts,” held in 2012 at the then Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies at the University of London. The papers at the conference were given in Italian and have been translated into English for this publication. The exceptions are the introduction (“Friuli: A Small Homeland in the Age of Transnationalism”) and the essay “Language and Time in Pier Paolo Pasolini’s Il sogno di una cosa,” both written in English by editor Rosa Mucignat.

The book is the first comprehensive study in English of Friulian, a Romance language of the Rhaeto-Romance family. Friulian is spoken in the Friuli Venezia Giulia region of northeastern Italy by more than 400,000 people and by an additional 200,000 Friulian emigrants in the rest of the world. The Friulian language was mentioned in written texts as early as 1150, has been used for literary purposes since the fourteenth century, and acquired official minority-language status in Italy in 1999. Geographically and politically remote, Friuli remained isolated for much of its history and developed a unique language that sustained a distinctive identity and culture.

This multidisciplinary volume gathers the work of ten contributors and is divided into four sections: “History and Status,” “Language and Culture,” “Migration,” and “Literature.”

The book opens with an essay by Fulvio Salimbeni, “History, Language and Society in Friuli (Thirty Years Later),” which revisits his book Storia, lingua e società in Friuli, co-authored with Giuseppe Francescato in 1976. The essay offers an overview of the major transformations in the social and economic life of Friuli, from pre-Roman Celtic cultures and the age of the patriarchs of Aquileia to the Risorgimento. Throughout his essay—which also recounts the peak years of Friulian migration (1881–1914), the two world wars, and the catastrophic earthquake of 1976—Salimbeni reconstructs “key moments of linguistic and cultural history, with a special eye to the exchanges with the German and Slavic worlds” (xv). Such a sociolinguistic approach is also characteristic of the essays in the section devoted to language and culture, in my opinion the most interesting of the whole collection.

This second section opens with Paola Benincà’s study of Friulian linguistics, which offers an “interpretation of the linguistic peculiarities of Friulian and its significance for the understanding of the development of the Romance system as a whole” (xvi). Even though Friuli found itself at the intersection of the Romance, Germanic, and Slavic linguistic families, it was able “to preserve its physiognomy and resist linguistic influences from outside” (31) and “remained internally united without being isolated” (32). Benincà provides examples of phonological, morphological, and syntactical phenomena that “shed a light on other Romance varieties where the same phenomena have left but disconnected and insufficient traces” (xvi), for example, Provençal, Catalan, Lombard, and Piedmontese.

Carla Marcato’s essay “The Friulian Lexicon” focuses on, and puts into historical perspective, certain uniquely Friulian words, such as the salutation mandi, which
“derives from the reduction of the formula corresponding to the Italian mi raccomando” (54). Her fascinating study highlights diatopic variations—“between the Eastern area and Carnia on the one hand, and the western area on the other” (55)—and lexical stratification, especially Celtic and Latin. The Friulian vocabulary also contains Venetian, German, and Slavic words, all of which testify to the long and complicated history of the region.

Next, Fabiana Fusco addresses “the issue of how the female figure is represented in Friulian lexicography” (67), specifically in the dictionaries Nuovo Pirona and Grant Dizionari Bilengâl. “The images of women as they appear on the pages,” according to Fusco, “are often one-dimensional” (81) and “defined as helpless, apt only for care work, but also seductive, evil and objects of sexual fetishism” (85).

Also devoted to sociolinguistic aspects of Friulian, and opening the section “Migration,” is Franco Finco’s “Friulian Migration to Latin America: Linguistic Reflexes.” In what seems to me the book’s most valuable study, Finco analyzes the linguistic phenomena that characterized the migration of Friulians to Argentina and Brazil from 1877 until the 1960s: “linguistic mixing, hybridization, a convergence towards shared expressive systems, the adoption of varieties, or total assimilation in the new language” (92). In communities formed by groups of immigrants speaking different dialects, usually one variety prevailed over the others. The so-called italiàn (or vêneto brasileiro), of Venetian origin, was usually spoken in the southern Brazilian states of Paraná, Santa Caterina, and Rio Grande do Sul, but Friulian was also spoken in Rio Grande do Sul’s Nova Udine settlement. A well-documented example of the prestige of Friulian outside Friuli can be found in Colonia Caroya (founded in 1878), in the Argentinian province of Córdoba. Despite the widespread stigmatization of the linguistic habits of the gringos, that is, European migrants who were not native speakers of Spanish [. . . ], the live usage of Friulian in Colonia Caroya endured [. . . ] to such an extent, that many people of non-Friulian origin (Venetians, Lombards) or native Spanish speakers learnt Friulian out of necessity, particularly in the workplace and in social relationships. (96)

Drawing on interviews with Friulian migrants collected in 2007 in Argentina by Sofia Solayne Noboa, Finco concludes that their Friulian is peppered with Spanish expressions and discourse markers such as tambien or bueno; that their lexicon is interspersed with or replaced by loan words from Spanish (for example, çacéis (green beans), Friulian uainis, from the Spanish chauchas); and that adaptations of Hispanicisms to Friulian lexical structures are not infrequent. Furthermore, there are “very interesting semantic loans from Spanish, with mutations or the addition of meanings” (97); for example, pòpul means not only “people” but “town, village” (Friulian paîs, vile), based on the Spanish pueblo. Finco concludes by pointing out another aspect of Friulian emigration to Latin America: “Often, those who returned spoke a ‘strange’ Friulian compared to that spoken in Friuli, [. . . ] as if their language had become frozen at the time of their emigration or of that of their parents” (98).

Also interesting are Rienzo Pellegrini’s observations on recent Friulian poetry in the final section of the book, where he examines poems by Siro Angeli (“L’âga dal Tajamènt”), Amedeo Giacomini (“Tiliment”), and Novella Cantarutti (“La Grava”)
that “allow us to come into contact [. . .] with poetic writing in Friulian and with the kind of Friulian that finds its way into writing” (171). Pellegrini provides a brief chronology of Friulian poetry, focusing on crucial books such as Pietro Zorutti’s Strolic, Pier Paolo Pasolini’s Poesie a Casarsa, Giuseppe Marchetti’s Dov’è la mia patria, and Leonardo Zannier’s Libers . . . di scugni là. He highlights two divergent approaches to Friulian: Pasolini’s “notion of dialect as an exclusively poetic language and that of Friulian as a fully functioning language” (173) and Novella Cantarutti’s view that Friulian, despite being “a jealously protected idiolect” (184), is nevertheless capable of maintaining “a firm connection with a specific and sharply focused social and geographical setting” (185).

The remaining essays are, in my opinion, less successful because they deal with subjects that are not germane to a collection whose stated purpose is “to provide English-speaking readers with an in-depth and up-to-date account of the language and culture of Friuli from antiquity to the present” (xiv). Rosa Mucignat’s study of Pasolini’s novel Il sogno di una cosa is brilliant, but the fact remains that the novel is in standard Italian, not Friulian. Then there are the two essays on Friulian mosaic workers in London and Canada, written, respectively, by Javier P. Grossutti and Olga Zorzi Pugliese. While these success stories will make Friulian readers proud, they provide little insight into Friulian migration history. Grossutti himself admits that “London and the rest of Great Britain [. . .] have never been the most popular destinations for Friulian migrants” (103), while Pugliese concedes that the tenacity with which Friulians “have tried to keep their traditions alive [. . .] in Canada” is less well demonstrated by the “approximately two hundred mosaic art works” they created than by the “continuing presence of associations such as the Fameis furlanis (Friulian Families) and the Fogolârs furlans (Friulian Hearts) throughout the country” (122). An essay on these associations would, I think, have been more suitable. Finally, there is an extremely detailed essay by William Cisilino about the laws for the protection of the Friulian language; it will tell you more than you ever wanted to know about this arid subject.

Despite these criticisms, The Friulian Language deserves to be read, particularly by those interested in sociolinguistics, Romance languages, and dialectology. It has the merit of introducing to the English-speaking world a language and a culture that deserve to be better known, and its multidisciplinary approach, though not without faults, will stand as a model for other studies devoted to minority languages.

—TIBERIO SNAIDERO

Queens College, City University of New York