

Original article published in the Bündner Woche, June 25, 2025, p. 27

Research in Graubünden

Documenting linguistic diversity

Language atlases preserve the knowledge of words



Scheuermeier (right) records local terms in his notebook (Ostana, Piedmont, 1922). Image credit: AIS Archive. University of Bern

them the young scholar Paul Scheuermeier, traveled from village to village across Italy and southern Switzerland with notebooks and a catalogue of questions. The aim was to document the richness of local dialects in a Romance language atlas, from agricultural and craft-related terminology to everyday expressions. During his often adventurous journey, Scheuermeier was deeply impressed by the winter landscape of the Engadine: “A wide, snow-covered valley sparkling in the sun opened before me. This was the land I was now to cross on skis [...]”

Nearly 90 years later, *AIS, reloaded* (2016–2019) built on the original AIS, using digital tools and focusing initially on Switzerland. Stefano Negrinelli was responsible for the interviews conducted in the canton of Graubünden. Together with other researchers, he visited 18 Romansh-speaking communities. “Each conversation lasted between nine and twelve hours, spread over two days. Our interview partners were usually elderly people who agreed to take part voluntarily,” Negrinelli explains. More than 35,000 entries were collected during the interviews. In a study based on this data, Negrinelli compared today’s answers with the original AIS records to analyze linguistic change. “If someone used a different word than in the past, I would ask for synonyms or whether they remembered the original term passively.” He then classified the responses as *active*, *passive*, or *unknown*.

One notable—but not surprising—trend was the increasing influence of German. Words like *la wendla* (from *Windel*, diaper) or *la schnorapiertg* (pig’s snout, from *Schnorre*) reflect the growing Germanization of

What happens to a language when the things it describes disappear from everyday life? Linguist Stefano Negrinelli explores this question, focusing on Romansh. Born in Ticino, Negrinelli found his way to the Romansh language through his involvement in the SNSF project *AIS, reloaded*, a modern revival of the language atlas *Atlante Italo-Svizzero (AIS)*.

The original large-scale linguistic project was completed in 1940 after more than 20 years of work, led by Swiss Romance scholars Karl Jaberg and Jakob Jud. Field researchers commissioned by the two, among

Romansh, particularly noticeable today in the Sutsilvan idiom. One reason for the language shift is the disappearance of the objects these words describe, such as “spinning wheel” or “flail”. “As the object disappears from use, the word often vanishes too,” says Negrinelli.

Since 2024, Negrinelli has been working at the Institut dal Dicziunari Rumantsch Grischun (IDRG) in Chur, where he compiles new fascicles for the comprehensive Romansh dictionary. The words documented in the dictionary are more than linguistic entries. They tell stories of life, work, and thought in the Romansh-speaking region. “Romansh is alive, but endangered,” says Negrinelli. “It needs political support, visibility in schools, and projects like *AIS, reloaded* that make a language and its cultural heritage visible before they fade into oblivion.”

Stefano Negrinelli and Daniela Heinen

Institut dal Dicziunari Rumantsch Grischun

The Institut dal Dicziunari Rumantsch Grischun (IDRG), based in Chur and run by the Societad Retorumantscha (SRR), is responsible for compiling the national dictionary of the Romansh language of Graubünden. It documents the vocabulary of all idioms and dialects, including the spoken language.

www.drg.ch



Stefano Negrinelli. Image provided.

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