Note concerning the Linguistic Position of Sardinian

by

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With the completion of Max Leopold Wagner's monumental
Dizionario etymologico sardo (Carl Winter, Heidelberg), Romanists
are provided with a powerful tool with which to penetrate into
the lexical riches of the Sardinian language.

However, there still exists a disagreement of scholarly opinions
as to whether this interesting language should be regarded as
a legitimate member of Romance languages or treated as an in-
dependent language of yet uncertain origin.

Without committing himself to either camp, the writer thinks
that it will be worthwhile to recapitulate here some of the
most prominent linguistic features of Sardinian which mark it
off from other Romance sisters, Italian in particular. Although
we are free to make our own decisions, a decision will have to
be made based on accurate data in a spirit of scientific imparti-
ality.

Before the discussion of linguistic features is attempted, it may
not be out of place to familiarize ourselves with the highlights
of Sardinian history which is quite marked by vicissitudes. The
knowledge of historical events which Sardinia has undergone may
provide clues to the elucidation of linguistic problems veiled
in obscurity.

Though definite documentary evidence is scanty, Sardinia appears
to have been the supply source of slaves and the island to which
exiles were transported in the days of Roman Empire. From A.D.
456 to 534 it was part of the Vandal kingdom and from the 6th to

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the 8th centuries it was nominally subjected to the Eastern
Byzantine Empire. Record remains of a petition sent by
Sardinia to the Frankish Empire in 815 asking for its protec-
tion against the incursions of the Saracens and pirates. Soon
after it was discarded by Christendom but there is no evidence
that any Muslim settlement was established there for an extensive
period of time. Probably the chaos and anarchy prevailed
over the island for next 200 years or so.

Pope Johannes XVIII in 1004 preached a crusade with the promise
that any party would be entitled to Sardinia when it proved
successful in releasing it from the hand of infidel Muslims.
Pisa and Genoa competed with each other for the conquest of the
island and, in 1050, Pisa carried the day after a prolonged
strife. The Pisan supremacy, however, did not seem to have
been really effective till the 13th century. After Pisa was
defeated by Genoa in 1284, it was in turn captured by Aragon of
Spain in 1323. Under the Aragonese rule, the official language
was Catalan at first but was gradually replaced by Castilian.
Castilian held its linguistic stronghold till 1764, even if the
island itself was subjugated by Austria in 1708. Following
the War of Spanish Succession, Sardinia fell into the hand of
the dukes of Savoy. Thereafter, the fortunes of the island
were linked to Italy and everybody knows that Victor Emmanuel,
King of Sardinia, became the king of United Italy in 1861.

At present, Romanists usually classify Sardinian into three
dialectal groups: Logudorian (which retains the most con-
servative features), southern Campidanian and north-eastern
Gallurian. Campidanian shows marked evidence of Spanish
influence, while Gallurian bears similarities with southern
Corsican dialects.

The following discussion of chief linguistic characteristics
of Sardinian is, therefore, based on those of Logudorian.

1. The accented vowels of Latin prototype are preserved, i.e., i and u are distinct from e and o.

      Lat. nucem > nughe

      Lat. pilum > pilu

2. Final s and t are preserved.

      Lat. cantas > cantas (cf. It. canti)

      Lat. plantat > plantat

3. Lat. velars c and g remain unpalatarized before e and i.

      Lat. facis > faghes

This phenomenon is held as proof that Old Lat. c and g were pronounced as /k/ and /g/ in such phonetic environment. However, its origin needs yet to be clarified.

4. Lat. consonantal clusters -cl- and -bl- remain as such.

      Lat. clarum > claru (cf. It. chiaro)

5. Lat. cu-, gu-, qua- and gua- undergo the labialization to produce bba- or bb.

      Lat. aquam > abba (cf. It. aqua)

6. The double -ll- in Latin transforms itself into -dd-.

      Lat. bellum > beddu

7. The Latin combination of s + consonant, when it is in initial position, prefixes the permanent -i.

      Lat. stellam > istella

The same phenomenon is observable in Italian, where we have ' Io sono in iscuola ' (I am at school) but this -i in Italian is movable.

8. What is called ' Satzphonetik ' in German prevails in Sardinian to a considerable extent, i.e., phonetic changes are largely determined by the position of words or sounds in sentences.

For example, su ove (the ox) is contrasted with sos boves (the

oxen). In this pair, what appears in the plural (bove) is the
original morpheme : the phoneme -b- drops out between vowels.

9. The definite article derives from Lat. ipsum. The
singular is su and the plural sus or sos.
In other Romance sisters, the definite article is traced to illum.
Cf. el, la in Spanish, il, lo in Italian, le, la in French, etc.

10. Preference of preterites in -si rather than in -va (It.)
or ba (Sp.).

Lat. cantavi > cantesi (cf. It. cantava, Sp.
cantaba)

11. Future tense of the verb is formed by Lat. habere + pre-
position ad + infinitive, while in It., Fr., Sp. and Port. the
modern counterpart of habere is fused with the infinitives, as
in cantare (I shall sing) in Spanish.

Lat. habeo ad manducare > hapo a mandigare (I
shall eat)

This future formation in Sardinian furnishes a definite cor-
roboration as to the development of Romance future tense.
Although there must be certain influences coming from linguistic
substrata of Sardinia, it seems safe enough to infer that, as for
its Latin features, Sardinian represents much earlier stage of
Vulgar Latin than other Romance languages.
For reference, Corsican shares the following peculiarities with
Sardinian.

1. Lat. gu becomes bu.

Lat. gunna > Cors. bunna (cf. It. gonna)

2. Lat. -ll- appears as -dr- (which is assimilated as -dd-
in Sard.).

Lat. bellum > Cors. bedru (cf. beddu in Sard.,
bello in It.)