Lombard Across the Border: Negotiating Borderland Identities Through Language Revitalization

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the role of grassroots Lombard language revitalization efforts in shaping borderland identities across the Swiss–Italian border. Moving beyond fixed notions of state borders, it examines how everyday practices of language promotion contribute to the continuous negotiation, contestation, and reproduction of spatial identities. Drawing on 16 qualitative interviews with actors engaged in Lombard revitalization and the author's own insider perspective, the study identifies three patterns of borderland identification: the reinforcement of local and regional identities, the development of cross-border identification grounded in the shared Lombard language, and the formation of a borderless linguistic community facilitated by online platforms. The findings highlight the fuzziness of spatial identities, showing that individuals can simultaneously engage with multiple, sometimes contradictory, levels of identification. This study contributes to border studies by demonstrating that language revitalization offers a tangible lens for understanding everyday bordering and the dynamic processes through which borders and identities are negotiated.

Keywords: *Lombard language, language revitalization, borderland identities, Swiss–Italian border, everyday bordering, cross-border communities, insider research, regionalism*

Abstract (Italian)

Questa tesi si propone di analizzare il ruolo degli sforzi di rivitalizzazione della lingua lombarda promossi dal basso nella costruzione delle identità di frontiera lungo il confine tra Svizzera e Italia. Superando le concezioni statiche dei confini politici tra nazioni, questo studio indaga come le pratiche quotidiane di promozione linguistica contribuiscano alla contestazione e ridefinizione continua delle identità territoriali. La ricerca si basa su sedici interviste qualitative condotte con attori coinvolti nella rivitalizzazione del lombardo e individua tre principali modalità di identificazione territoriale alla frontiera: il rafforzamento delle identità locali e regionali, lo sviluppo di un'identificazione transfrontaliera fondata sulla condivisione della lingua lombarda e la formazione di una comunità linguistica senza confini facilitata dalle piattaforme online. I risultati evidenziano la fluidità delle identità territoriali, mostrando come gli individui possano contemporaneamente esprimere più livelli di identificazione, talvolta contraddittori fra di loro. Questo lavoro contribuisce agli studi sui confini dimostrando come la rivitalizzazione linguistica possa costituire una lente per comprendere i processi dinamici attraverso cui confini e identità vengono ridefiniti nel quotidiano (*everyday bordering*).

Parole chiave: *lingua lombarda, rivitalizzazione linguistica, identità di frontiera, confine tra Svizzera e Italia, everyday bordering, comunità transfrontaliere, regionalismo*

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Context

The border between Switzerland and Italy divides a region that shares many cultural traits, the most evident being language. The official language on both sides of the Swiss–Italian border is Italian. However, there is another language native to the region that predates the introduction of Italian: Lombard. For most local people, it is still called a 'dialect' to distinguish it from the officially recognized language. Linguists have argued that this term is both inaccurate and stigmatizing, as it implies subordination to Italian (Coluzzi, 2008; Coluzzi et al., 2018; Tamburelli & Tosco, 2021). Lombard is currently in a state of decline, both in Lombardy (on the Italian side) and in *Svizzera italiana* (the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland), placing it at risk of disappearing in the future (Casoni, 2018; Coluzzi, 2019). In response to this endangered status, a diverse range of activists have engaged in grassroots revitalization initiatives to promote the language. These efforts take many forms, from language courses and conferences to online initiatives such as YouTube channels, social media pages, and a Lombard Wikipedia (Coluzzi et al., 2021; Miola, 2013).

Such revitalization initatives are interesting not only from a sociolinguistic perspective but also from a broader cultural and political standpoint, as they do not occur in isolation. The Lombard language spans across a state border and must be understood

within the history of this borderland. Before the emergence of the border, the two sides constituted a political entity corresponding to the area where Lombard was spoken; separate national identities developed only afterwards. A few decades ago, two comparable regionalist parties rose to power on each side of the border, instrumentalizing regional identities, and the Lombard party politicized the language in the mainstream for the first time (Giordano, 2000; Mazzoleni & Mueller, 2017; Mazzoleni & Ruzza, 2018; Ruzza, 2008). Considering this historical context, it is clear that questions of identity and language have long been intertwined in the borderland and recent revitalization initiatives represent a continuation of these dynamics. Some activists frame Lombard as a shared cross-border language, challenging the dominance of the official state language and, implicitly, the border itself. Others focus on local efforts, retaining the term 'dialect' and rejecting a cross-border identity. Whether the border is questioned or reinforced, revitalization practices reveal the close connection between identity and the border. This illustrates that borders are not solely fixed impositions from above by states—they are continuously created and negotiated, with everyday practices of local people playing a key role in this process (Brambilla et al., 2015; Linde-Laursen, 2016; Prokkola, 2009; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). Efforts to promote Lombard thus provide a window into these processes, demonstrating how language practices can inform political notions of identity across the borderland.

1.2   Problem Statement

Broadly speaking, border scholars have increasingly emphasized the importance of investigating the everyday, bottom-up dimension of border and national identity construction and reproduction (Linde-Laursen, 2016; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). At the same time, borderland research has largely focused on conflict areas, leaving mundane Western European borderlands relatively understudied, even though they provide valuable opportunities to examine cultural and social dynamics across borders (Boesen, 2017).

Turning to the Swiss–Italian borderland, existing research similarly reveals gaps. Cross-border studies have engaged with the border (Albertazzi, 2007; Leimgruber, 1991; Mazzoleni & Mueller, 2017; Mazzoleni & Ruzza, 2018) but largely neglect bottom-up, everyday practices. Linguistic studies have examined grassroots language revitalization without connecting it to the border (Coluzzi et al., 2018, 2021; Tamburelli, 2024). In fact, research on Lombard revitalization has predominantly focused on the Italian side, leaving cross-border dynamics underexplored.

A comprehensive understanding of Lombard revitalization from a political geography perspective is therefore necessary and it provides concrete examples of everyday practices that shape borderland identities, contributing to border studies. This topic is also personally meaningful to me: as a speaker of Lombard from *Svizzera italiana*, I have experienced firsthand the complexity of negotiating identity in the borderland, which motivates me to investigate how these dynamics are articulated and navigated by different actors.

1.3   Research Aim and Question

Building on the gaps identified in the problem statement, this thesis focuses on actors driving grassroots Lombard language revitalization across the Swiss–Italian border, exploring the feelings of spatial identity that emerge from these initiatives and how they are expressed.

The central research question guiding this thesis is: **How do linguistic practices and perceptions surrounding the revitalization of the Lombard language reflect and produce borderland identities across the Swiss–Italian border?**

To address this question, I draw on qualitative interviews conducted between January and February 2025 with a diverse range of actors engaged in Lombard language promotion initiatives, supplemented by my personal experience and knowledge of the topic. The scope of this research is limited to revitalization actors rather than the

broader population of Lombard speakers, both due to practical constraints of conducting large-scale ethnography and to the fact that revitalization practices are closely tied to negotiations of identity.

1.4 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is organized into the following chapters. After the introduction, in Chapter 2 I develop the theoretical framework, drawing primarily on border studies. I contest fixed notions of state borders and national identities, emphasize borderlands as sites of overlapping identities, and introduce the concept of everyday bordering, framing language revitalization as an example of this practice. In Chapter 3, I present and justify my methodological approach, detailing how I collected and analyzed my interviews, while reflecting on my positionality as an insider from the borderland. In Chapter 4, I examine the historical and political context of the Swiss–Italian borderland, focusing on the role of language in top-down nation-building and in the strategies of regionalist parties. Rather than merely describing events, I critically engage with the literature through the lens of my theoretical framework. In Chapter 5, I present and analyze the findings from my interviews, showing from a bottom-up perspective how revitalization activists use Lombard to both reproduce existing borderland identities and create new ones, at times reinforcing the state border and at others contesting it. Finally, in the conclusion, I bring together the main findings and reflect on the broader implications of language revitalization for understanding borders, identities, and belonging.

1.5 A Note on Terminology

Before delving further into the research subject, I would like to clarify my use of certain terminology. First, I have chosen to use the term 'Lombard language', even though it is contested among linguists, instead of 'dialect', for two reasons. On the one hand, I agree with linguists who argue that 'Lombard language' is linguistically more accurate than

'dialect'. On the other hand, I intend to make a political statement. Names affects our perceptions, and the term 'dialect' carries a subordinate connotation relative to Italian. By using 'Lombard language', I aim to give it greater legitimacy and visibility, which may in turn support revitalization efforts. As Lombard is my mother tongue, this is both a personal and academic concern. Second, throughout this thesis I retain the Italian term '*Svizzera italiana*' without translation. I believe there is no fully satisfactory English equivalent. While 'Italian-speaking part of Switzerland' is a literal option, it is lengthy and emphasizes only Italian, without acknowledging the presence of Lombard.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I will lay the theoretical foundation for my thesis by integrating key concepts with a state-of-the-art review of the literature. The focus of my research is on borderland identities across the Swiss–Italian border and the role of language revitalization practices in negotiating them—whether by reflecting existing identities or producing new ones. An understanding of state borders is therefore an essential premise for this research.

I will begin by contesting the notion of political borders as fixed, natural lines of separation between states. Drawing on border studies, I will show instead that borders are socially constructed, and tied to broader processes of identity formation. For this purpose, I will also examine how national identities are created.

I will then show why borderlands are particularly compelling sites for studying spatial identities. Borderlands highlight the fuzziness of boundaries and challenge the assumption that borders are sharp and fixed. I argue that they are sites where phenomena that contest or complicate the state and its territorial extent emerge, such as regionalist movements, cross-border identities, and the persistence of regional languages—a theme I will return to in Chapter 4.

Finally, I will introduce the concept of everyday bordering to emphasize that borders, identities, and official languages are not only imposed from above by the state but are

also produced, reproduced, and contested from below in daily life. Here, I will situate grassroots language revitalization practices as efforts that can question state borders.

2.1   Questioning Borders

When looking at a map, borders are inescapable. Zooming out from anywhere, more and more borders start to appear: first the local ones, around towns and villages, then regional borders, and eventually the most important ones for modern Europe: state borders. I believe that the shape of a country becomes a deeply familiar one, impressed upon the minds of its citizens from an early age. Drawing from my own experience in Switzerland, the outline of the state was omnipresent at school: it hung on the classroom wall throughout the year, and in geography lessons we were required to draw it by heart. Borders thus become nothing more than lines on paper—so abstract, so familiar, that their origin or legitimacy is rarely questioned.

In this section, I draw from border studies to argue that borders are not natural lines of separation between nation-states but rather socially constructed institutions. I also show how they serve simultaneously to construct and legitimize the nation itself, as well as its neighboring states.

2.1.1   Borders as Lines

Early border studies conceptualized borders as static lines that divided bounded entities: states. Scholars in the first half of the twentieth century understood borders as the physical outcome of political decision-making—essentially lines drawn on maps that could only shift as a result of war, peace treaties, or negotiations (Newman, 2006; Paasi, 1998). While it was acknowledged that borders could be moved, they were still regarded as empirical entities. Nation-states, accordingly, were conceptualized as bounded units (Paasi, 1998). This perspective also relied on a series of binary distinctions—such as 'inside–outside' or 'here–there'—which reinforced the idea of borders as "constituting

a sharp edge and a clear line of separation between two distinct entities, or opposites."
(Newman, 2006, p. 176). Within this framework, borders were described and classified,
rather than examined in terms of their role in the construction of territory, identity,
and power (Paasi, 1998).

Later, however, as Newman (2006) emphasizes, border scholars began to reconceptualize
borders as dynamic and socially constructed. This shift— from borders as fixed lines
to borders as processes—marks the perspective I turn to next and that underpins my
thesis.

2.1.2   Bordering

This shift—from viewing borders as fixed lines to understanding them as dynamic
processes—marked a key development in border studies beginning in the late 1980s and
1990s (Brambilla et al., 2015; Paasi, 2005). The earlier essentialist perspective gave way
to a constructivist understanding of borders. Agnew (1994) describes the 'territorial
trap' as the assumption that the nation-state is a natural, primordial unit and that
its borders neatly delimit its power, acting as containers. Scholars moved beyond this
'territorial trap', transforming the concept of the border from a static noun into the
active practice of 'bordering': a dynamic and ongoing process. Bordering is conceived
as a cultural process that is "always changing in response to historic developments and
constantly being transformed by and transforming the social, cultural, and political
contexts" in which it is embedded (Linde-Laursen, 2016, p. 3). Importantly, bordering
operates at multiple scales and levels, simultaneously constructing, reinforcing, and
negotiating boundaries (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019).

However, bordering is not only a top-down practice imposed by state actors; it also
has a bottom-up dimension. The social and cultural practices of bordering are not
produced in isolation—they rely on the everyday engagement of individuals and groups
who internalize, reproduce, and sometimes contest them. In Section 2.3, I will focus on
this everyday aspect of bordering.

2.1.3 Constructing National Identity

Just as borders are no longer conceptualized as fixed lines in border studies, nations are also no longer considered naturally bounded entities; instead, they are understood as discursive formations as well. Bordering is not only about establishing boundaries—it is also about shaping national identity. The formation of identity operates through the process of 'Othering': the construction of symbolic distinctions between 'Us' and 'the Other' (Paasi, 2005) This distinction underpins the construction of national identity, drawing boundaries that define where one national belonging ends and another begins. In this way, other national belongings are consequentially legitimated. As Paasi (2003) notes, "identity is often associated with boundaries and narratives that imply an opposition to the Other." (p.480). This highlights that identity is both constructed and closely intertwined with borders.

While drawing boundaries applies to many kinds of identity—such as class, gender, or sexuality—in the case of national identity it acquires a tangible territorial dimension. Political borders act as both institutional and symbolic markers of sovereignty, delineating the geographical extent where power changes hands (Kaplan, 2000; Paasi, 2005). In this sense, the territorial dimension is central to national identity: boundaries are a core element of territory building, the process of gaining control over a specific space and its resources (Paasi, 2009).

Although national identity is often framed as inherently tied to territory and bounded by political borders, borderlands show that this is not the case in practice. In these sites, multiple identities often coexist, overlap, and sometimes cross official borders, revealing the fluidity of territorial boundaries—a theme I explore in the next section.

2.2 Borderlands

I believe that borderlands are the most compelling sites to investigate how borders and identities are actually constructed. Especially where a state border cuts across a culturally cohesive region, the overlapping of identities and the fuzziness of boundaries become evident. This demonstrates that borders are more than mere lines on a map: they are instead ambiguous and multidimensional, acting not only as separators but also as connectors, where hybrid, cross-border identities can emerge. I will later discuss how languages, especially regional languages, illustrate the arbitrary nature of state borders and how they can link communities on either side of a border, as they often predate modern political boundaries. Furthermore, phenomena such as regionalist movements openly contest borders and national identities, frequently drawing on regional languages to legitimize their claims.

Before delving deeper, it is important to define what I mean by 'borderland'. The term itself is somewhat ambiguous and not strictly defined by geographical limits. I rely on Yuval-Davis et al.'s (2019) definition:

> "Borderlands are specific territorial zones in which the geographic state borders themselves become embedded in the everyday lives, identities, and livelihood of the people who live in them, so that the border largely defines the spatial understanding of the local context and the social and cultural meanings attached to them." (p. 21).

In my opinion, this definition is especially helpful because it highlights that borderlands are not simply areas delimited by their distance to the border, but spaces where bordering processes actively shape people's lives and identities.

2.2.1 Overlapping Spatial Identities

National identity is not the only possible form of spatial identification. Other spatial legacies—sometimes predating the formation of the state—exist at the local or regional level. These are referred to as 'spatial identities' (Kaplan, 2000). Borderlands are unique in that they bring together multiple spatial identities operating simultaneously at different scales (Kaplan, 2000).

At state borders, national belonging can be reinforced and weakened simultaneously. Borders often function as sites where nations are actively constructed and asserted, for instance through measures such as military surveillance or heightened state control (Paasi, 1998). At the same time, borderlands can be hybrid, ambiguous spaces where national ties are looser and alternative cultural influences—local, regional, or transnational—take hold (Kaplan, 2000; Prokkola, 2009). This coexistence is particularly evident when "the political boundary does not coincide with the cultural boundary", resulting in a 'messy' break where the borderland becomes a zone of both control and cultural negotiation (Kaplan, 2000, p. 46).

These dynamics reveal that spatial identities not only coexist and overlap but can also cross political borders. As Prokkola (2009) observes: "people can identify simultaneously with their local surroundings, national territory and transnational entities and networks." (p.34). Borderlands therefore illustrate how national, regional, and local affiliations may overlap, merge, and even produce new hybrid borderland identities (Kaplan, 2000). These identities resist neat categorization within the narratives of ethnicity, race, and nation (Paasi, 2005), underscoring the blurred and contested nature of borders. Gloria Anzaldúa, in her groundbreaking work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), emphasizes hybridization as a defining cultural feature of borderland life.

Borders therefore function not only as lines of division but as connectors as well. As Leimgruber (1991) asserts: "The boundary zone is an area where different attitudes

and values meet and intermingle and where national identity is least questioned. As such, the border is not a line of separation but a zone of contact." (p.59). Borders thus embody ambiguity, situated between openness and closure, inclusion and exclusion (Van Houtum et al., 2005). Paasi (1998) similarly observes that borders simultaneously divide communities and enable interaction between them.

In my research, I focus on a borderland where the political boundary does not correspond to a cultural boundary, showing how multiple spatial identities coexist, overlap, and cross the border rather than exclude one another.

2.2.2 Language

In the following section, I will demonstrate that language is a crucial element for understanding the messiness and fuzziness of borders. Borderlands, in particular, are sites where languages can extend across political boundaries, defying the expectation that language neatly corresponds to state territory. In this sense, languages across borderlands not only reveal the limitations of state-centered notions of territory but also demonstrate how identity and belonging can transcend the political boundaries imposed by the state.

In nation-states, language is often portrayed as inherently tied to a specific territory in an essentialist way. However, this connection is not natural but socially and politically constructed during the formation of national languages. Scholars such as Ruzza (2000, 2008) emphasize that language serves as one of the strongest symbols of national identity, acting as a "marker of ethnic boundaries and an effective nation-building strategy" (Ruzza, 2008, p. 101). In the process of constructing the nation, cultural and political elites utilize language to anchor nationalist sentiments, highlighting its crucial position. Importantly, language itself does not intrinsically carry ethnic identity values; instead, it acquires meaning through processes that transform it into a national language (May, 2012). Language functions as a boundary marker, distinguishing insiders who speak the language from outsiders who do not, thereby delineating 'Us' from 'the Other'. As May

([2012](#)) notes, "being unable to speak a particular language places immediate restrictions on one's ability to communicate—and, by extension, identify—with those who speak that language and any ethnic and/or national identities with which it is associated." (p.137).

However, languages rarely matched the desired geographical limits of state power. During European state-building, boundaries were deliberately aligned with language to ensure it remained a powerful symbol of national identity (Ruzza, 2008). Following the French model of 'one nation – one language – one state', many countries imposed or diffused a common language through education systems (May, 2012; Szul, 2010; Vizi, 2016). Consequently, other languages within state territories were marginalized or suppressed to enforce the national-state project (Szul, 2010). This demonstrates that linguistic boundaries are politically constructed rather than naturally occurring, revealing how efforts to fix language within state borders are artificial.

This dynamic is particularly evident in the Italian-Swiss borderland, where one of these marginalized languages, Lombard, persists. Lombard is not the only regional language affected by these policies; Italy provides a clear example of how regional languages were downgraded to favor a national language. In fact, numerous regional languages in Italy were subordinated as dialects to promote Italian monolingualism (Screti, 2024; Tamburelli & Tosco, 2021). This policy's effects are still visible today, with many regional languages, including Lombard, endangered and lacking official recognition (Coluzzi et al., 2021). Despite this vulnerability, they continue to act as forms of resistance to the notion of a single national language and a unified identity, with cross-border languages in particular highlighting the complexity of linguistic and cultural identity in borderlands (Andersen & Prokkola, 2021; Ridanpää, 2021).

2.2.3 Regionalist Movements

If languages themselves challenge the rigidity of borders, regionalist movements make this challenge explicit by mobilizing language, culture, and history in political projects

that seek to redefine territorial boundaries. These movements demonstrate that borders are dynamic sites of negotiation, where processes of de-bordering—increasing border permeability—and re-bordering—the active construction of new or the reinforcement of existing boundaries—continuously reshape both identities and territories.

Territory is not solely tied to national identity. Other identities with strong territorial components exist at local or regional levels. While the state is traditionally seen as the main agent of territorial control, other actors—such as ethno-regional movements—also seek spatial authority (Paasi, 2009). Given how language acquired a territorial dimension through nation-building, it is unsurprising that ethno-regionalist movements instrumentalize regional languages to assert control over territories in opposition to state sovereignty (Ruzza, 2008). The territorial boundaries of these languages—though often unclear—are invoked to define regional territories distinct from state borders (Kabatek, 2019). This demonstrates the close link between territorial power and minority language policies. As Vizi (2016) explains, "in modern nation states language policy and territorial power are closely linked, both when we see power-sharing arrangements between the national ethnic majority and minority, and when central government denies such minority territorial claims" (p. 433).

For many regionalist movements, the state-imposed language symbolizes 'territorial otherness' where minority languages remain prevalent (Ruzza, 2008, p. 106). Examples are numerous across Europe, including Catalonia, Scotland, Wales, Québec, Sardinia, South Tyrol, Friuli, and Lombardy (Giordano, 2000; Häkli, 2001; Kaplan, 2000; Ruzza, 2000; Vizi, 2016). To support their territorial claims, ethno-regionalist movements construct regional identities distinct from national identities. Since regional languages often predate the nation-state, regions sometimes cross state borders, creating borderland areas with cross-border identities. For instance, Catalonia ideally encompasses parts of southern France, where Catalan-speaking minorities also reside (Häkli, 2001). Thus, regional identities can possess a cross-border dimension and be categorized as borderland identities.

However, language is not the sole element in constructing these regional identities. Paasi (2003) highlights other factors such as ideas of nature and landscape, economic conditions (success or recession), center–periphery relations, and experiences of marginalization. Focusing on the economic dimension, regionalist movements often aim to promote regional development and secure greater political and economic autonomy to give their region a competitive advantage (Fitjar, 2010). In this context, the focus on regional economic development helps regions gain importance in a competitive global market, which in turn makes state borders more permeable (Albert & Brock, 1996).

Together, these factors show that regionalist movements do more than resist central states—they actively engage with and redefine borders, a process that can be understood through the concepts of de-bordering and re-bordering, which I discuss next.

De-bordering and Re-bordering

De-bordering and re-bordering are usually discussed in the context of globalization. De-bordering refers to an increasing permeability of state borders for the flow of capital, goods, services, and people (Albert & Brock, 1996). Re-bordering, in contrast, refers to the construction or reinforcement of new territorial boundaries, showing that borders are constantly negotiated and reshaped (Paasi & Ferdoush, 2022). Importantly, these processes are not mutually exclusive: de-bordering and re-bordering can occur simultaneously, meaning that a border may be permeable for some people or practices (e.g., the flow of capital or tourists) and impermeable for others (e.g., through border controls or walls) (Paasi & Ferdoush, 2022).

I argue that regionalist movements engage in both de-bordering and re-bordering practices. They assert regional identities that extend beyond state borders, and they also seek to strengthen their region's position in the global market (de-bordering) and redefine boundaries within or across states (re-bordering). These dynamics highlight the fuzziness of borders and the fluidity of political, cultural, and linguistic identities in borderlands.

This reflection is especially relevant to my study of the Swiss–Italian borderland, where two regionalist parties actively invoked the border in their political discourse. As Mazzoleni and Mueller (2017) show, these parties engaged in both processes: on the one hand, they challenged their respective central governments and emphasized cultural ties across the border (de-bordering); on the other, they stigmatized political authorities on the opposite side, with one party additionally criticizing the inflow of cross-border workers (re-bordering). These dynamics will be examined in greater detail in Chapter 4.

2.3 Everyday bordering

After examining borders from a top-down, institutional perspective—showing how they are discursively constructed and actively shaped through phenomena such as regionalist movements and languages—I now turn to the bottom-up, everyday dimension of bordering in borderlands. Once a border is established by the state, inhabitants must live with it and make sense of it in relation to pre-existing spatial identities that often persist despite the new political division. This everyday dimension, although relatively underexplored in border studies, is central to my research, as it aligns closely with my focus on the lived experiences, practices, and negotiations of people inhabiting the Swiss–Italian borderland.

Scholars have increasingly emphasized the importance of focusing on the everyday experiences of those living in border regions (Brambilla et al., 2015; Linde-Laursen, 2016; Prokkola, 2009; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). Indeed, the intersection of "discourses of nationhood, bordering, and individuals' everyday life" remains a significantly understudied area (Linde-Laursen, 2016, p. 8). As Linde-Laursen (2016) observes: "the border is not a political fact disconnected from peoples' lives" and bordering processes help reveal "what the border means to people, how they live with, understand, and manipulate it" (p. 3). Thus, borders are not only imposed by institutions but are

also produced and performed in the everyday practices of ordinary people — making bordering a lived and situated process.

The everyday practices of bordering are inseparable from the everyday production and reproduction of national identity, as defining who belongs to the nation simultaneously defines who does not, thereby drawing boundaries. Billig (1995), in his work *Banal Nationalism*, identified a banal dimension of nationalism, showing that national identity is routinely reproduced through mundane, everyday practices that often go unnoticed. These reminders, such as a national flag on a public building, subtly reinforce the nation as natural and unquestioned (Billig, 1995). For him, these practices are framed more as top-down, transmitted by institutions to passive recipients. Antonsich (2016) extends this perspective by emphasizing the agency of ordinary people: nationalism can be "activated from below" (p. 33), with everyday practices shaping and expressing ideas of the nation, including negotiating who belongs and who does not. These everyday acts of negotiating belonging show how borders and national identities are mutually shaped in daily life — a process that, in my research, I also observe for regional and local identities in the Swiss–Italian borderland.

Building on this understanding, I approach bordering and identity as everyday, lived processes, focusing on how inhabitants of the Swiss–Italian borderland actively engage with, interpret, and negotiate both the border and the multiple spatial identities that structure their daily lives.

2.3.1   Language Revitalization Practices

As I have discussed in Section 2.2.2 language serves as a symbol of national identity. Historically, the national language has often been promoted at the expense of minority languages, repressing them to strengthen national cohesion. This is particularly evident in borderlands, where state borders can divide culturally and linguistically unified communities, marginalizing cross-border minority languages through the imposition of the national language (Ridanpää, 2021). When local activists engage in initiatives

to revitalize such minority languages, they foster cross-border identities that challenge nation-state ideologies, representing acts of resistance against the dominance of national identity (Ridanpää, 2021). In this sense, grassroots revitalization of minority languages constitutes not only an act of resistance but also a form of everyday bordering, illustrating how language practices—from individual use to community initiatives—can reshape borders and create new identities.

In my thesis, I focus specifically on Lombard, examining how inhabitants of the Swiss-Italian borderland engage with the language in ways that simultaneously reinforce and challenge borders, making it a concrete example of everyday bordering in action.

Chapter 3

Methodology

In this chapter, I will explain how I conducted my research, outlining the methods I employed and justifying why these particular approaches are best suited to addressing the research question. Since this thesis focuses on lived experiences of language revitalization in the Swiss–Italian borderland, the methodology I adopted foregrounds people's own stories, allowing me to explore the everyday dimensions of borders and belonging, and how individuals' language practices and perceptions contribute to shaping them.

First, I will introduce narrative inquiry as the central methodological approach, connecting it with the theory presented in Chapter 2 and situating it within debates in border studies. I will then describe the process of data collection, including the recruitment of participants, the profile of interviewees, the interview procedure, and the ethical considerations that guided the fieldwork. Following this, I will turn to data analysis, outlining the stages of transcription with its challenges, coding, and interpretation, which allowed me to identify recurring themes. Finally, I will reflect on my positionality as an insider-researcher from the borderland, considering how my background shaped the dynamics of the interviews and the knowledge that was produced.

3.1   Narrative Inquiry

As I began conducting my interviews on language revitalization, I quickly noticed that participants often responded by telling stories about their own lives. These stories re-

vealed not only their language perceptions and practices but also how they understood their place within the Swiss–Italian borderland. This confirmed that narrative inquiry offered a particularly valuable lens for my research: it captures how language revitalization is lived in everyday life, showing how people narrate their language practices as part of broader processes of belonging and bordering.

To explain why narrative inquiry is appropriate for my study, it is important to first consider the broader role of narratives in making sense of identity and borders. Narratives have been shown to play a central role in shaping both personal and collective identities (Prokkola, 2009). In borderlands especially, individuals "attempt to make sense of their experience of coexistence with the border and its practices" through storytelling (Español et al., 2021, p. 686). Narratives allow people to explain where they belong, what communities they feel part of, and how they position themselves in relation to others (Andersen & Prokkola, 2021). Focusing on narratives therefore enables moving beyond institutional or political discourses, as well as understanding how borders are experienced, interpreted, and given meaning in everyday life—including through practices such as language revitalization, which serve as a means for individuals to negotiate and perform their belonging in the borderland. As Yuval-Davis et al. (2019) argue, it is within "narratives and practices of everyday lives" (p.24) that bordering practices must be investigated.

I chose narrative inquiry as the methodological framework for working with these stories, as it treats narratives themselves as data. By collecting them, researchers can access lived experiences that are deeply intertwined with identity, belonging, and everyday practices (Czarniawska, 2004). Narrative inquiry can be approached in two ways: narrative analysis and analysis of narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995). In narrative analysis, the researcher reconstructs interview data into a single coherent life story, whereas in analysis of narratives, the focus is on identifying recurring patterns and themes across different people's stories. The latter approach was most suitable for my research, as my goal was not to produce full life stories but to compare language practices and

perceptions across participants and identify broader themes, as I will elaborate further in Section 3.3.

Conducting a narrative inquiry aligns with other qualitative work on borderland identities, such as Prokkola (2009), who also relied on personal stories to explore borderland experiences. However, much existing research on the Swiss–Italian border has followed a different path. Studies have predominantly relied on quantitative methods (Albertazzi, 2007; Leimgruber, 1991; Mazzoleni & Mueller, 2017; Mazzoleni & Ruzza, 2018), sometimes supplemented with interviews, but these have largely focused on top-down political party rhetoric across the border. While such studies provide useful insights into political discourses, they do not capture everyday practices through which identity is constructed—including grassroots acts like language revitalization. By contrast, a narrative inquiry approach makes these everyday practices visible. I argue that there is therefore a methodological need for more in-depth qualitative research that investigates how borderland identities are narrated and performed in daily life.

3.2   Data Collection

I collected 16 semi-structured interviews with individuals involved—to varying degrees—in the revitalization of the Lombard language on both sides of the Swiss–Italian border between January and February 2025. The participants were diverse in their backgrounds and roles in revitalization, including Lombard teachers, songwriters, You-Tubers, linguists, and cabaret actors, with ages ranging from their 20s to their 70s. Despite this diversity, all participants shared a passion for the Lombard language, which provided a common thread across the interviews. At the same time, this diversity allows for capturing a wide range of experiences of the border. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was recorded on my personal device. Most were conducted entirely in Lombard, a few in Italian, and in some cases participants switched between the two languages for certain expressions.

Participants were recruited via social media, personal contacts, and subsequently through networking. I aimed for as much representation as possible in terms of age, gender, and geographic location, although this was naturally constrained by the small sample size. All participants signed a consent form and explicitly agreed not to be anonymized. I interpret this as reflecting their pride in being involved with the language, as well as the fact that many are generally outspoken about the topic through public channels. A list of participants, including relevant contextual details, is provided in the table below (Table 3.1).

Name	Place of Origin	Interview Language	Interview Date	Age Group	Role in Revitalization
Alfredo Parolini	Mesocco, Italian Grisons	Lombard	16.02.2025	60+	- Writes songs and poetry in Mesoccone (a dialect of the Lombard language)
Aris Guidotti	Biasca, Ticino	Lombard	28.02.2025	20-40	- Promotes Lombard, particularly the Biasca dialect, through translations, presentations, poetry collections, and article writing - Hosted a podcast in the Biasca dialect aimed at discussing and debunking stigmas surrounding the Lombard language
Brian Sciretti	Milan, Lombardy	Lombard	17.02.2025	20-40	- Organizes the *Lombard Linguistic Wikiconference* - Member of the *Academia Bonvesin de la Riva*, which studies and promotes Lombard - Runs a YouTube channel addressing linguistic issues related to the Lombard language
Fabio Fumagalli	Milan, Lombardy	Lombard	14.02.2025	60+	- Teaches a Milanese course (a dialect of the Lombard language) - Leads the theatre company *Cabaret Milano Duemila*, which performs in Milanese - Runs a YouTube channel dedicated to promoting Milanese

Table 3.1 continued from previous page

Giacomo Morandi	Cislago, Lombardy	Italian	30.01.2025	60+	- Organizes Lombard short novel and songwriting competitions for *Svizzera italiana* and Lombardy - Publishes books by Lombard authors
Gisa Lardi	Poschiavo, Italian Grisons	Lombard	08.02.2025	60+	- Teaches a Poschiavino course (a dialect of the Lombard language)
Gisi Schena	Sondalo, Lombardy	Lombard	07.02.2025	40-60	- Organizes a Lombard poetry competition for the Sondrio district (Lombardy) and the Italian Grisons
Guido Casellini	Arogno, Ticino	Lombard	31.01.2025	60+	- Teaches a Ticinese dialect course (a dialect of the Lombard language)
Jacopo Dovico	Milan, Lombardy	Lombard	20.02.2025	20-40	- Promotes the Lombard language on social media - Member of the *Academia Bonvesin de la Riva* - Co-developed the *'Noeuva Ortografia Lombarda'*
Marco Tamburelli	Oltrepò Pavese, Lombardy	Lombard	10.02.2025	40-60	- Professor of linguistics who advocates for the Lombard language and its unified orthography
Matteo Casoni	Bellinzona, Ticino	Italian	03.02.2025	40-60	- Researcher at the *Osservatorio Linguistico della Svizzera Italiana* - Author of academic articles on Ticinese dialect
Nicholas Marioli	Lugano, Ticino	Lombard	21.02.2025	20-40	- Promoted a motion to introduce an optional Ticinese dialect course in schools in Lugano
Paolo Ferrazzini	Arbedo, Ticino	Lombard	23.01.2025	60+	- Former member of the *Cabaret della Svizzera Italiana* theatre company, which performed in the Ticinese dialect

Table 3.1 continued from previous page

Simona Scuri	Milan, Lombardy	Lombard	31.01.2025	40-60	- Chair of the association *Far Lombard*, which promotes Lombard through events, conferences, books and translations
Stefano Vassere	Lugano, Ticino	Italian	21.02.2025	60+	- Linguist with an interest in sociolinguistic issues - Spoke about Ticinese dialect in a program on Swiss Italian television
Tobia Testa	Milan, Lombardy	Lombard	11.02.2025	20-40	- Taught a Lombard language and culture course at his former high school, having learned the language independently

Table 3.1: Overview of Interview Participants: Place of Origin, Interview Language, Date, Age Group and Role in Revitalization

Almost all interviews on the Swiss side were conducted in person. On the Italian side, due to greater travel distances, most interviews took place online. For in-person meetings, I offered to meet participants at a location convenient for them, typically a quiet café. On one occasion, the interview was held at a participant's home, and twice participants visited my parents' house in our village. I did not observe any significant differences in the quality or tone of the interviews across settings. Generally, interviews began with informal conversation—often including a few jokes—to create a relaxed atmosphere before transitioning to the interview questions.

I was aware that face-to-face interviews can sometimes lead participants to give politically correct or generic, delocalized responses rather than concrete, personal experiences (Audikana et al., 2024). I therefore worked to ensure participants felt comfortable throughout. As I discuss in Section 3.4, being part of the Lombard-speaking community and conducting interviews in Lombard likely contributed to participants being more open with me. The fact that some respondents shared politically incorrect jokes suggests that I was able to establish a level of trust and openness with them. In some

cases, conversations continued beyond the interview—for instance, when interviewees offered to drive me to the train station. These informal interactions sometimes shifted away from language revitalization toward broader topics such as politics.

While unstructured interviews are often advocated when collecting personal stories (Savin-Baden & Van Niekerk, 2007), I found that some degree of structure was necessary to allow for later comparison. My aim was to conduct a thematic analysis, which focuses on identifying patterns and recurring themes, and therefore required some degree of comparison across interviews. Accordingly, I developed a semi-structured interview guide with many open-ended questions to encourage the emergence of personal stories. The guide, which can be found in Appendix A, was adapted for each participant in advance based on their specific role in Lombard language revitalization.

Interviews revolved around several core themes: personal engagement with and feelings about the Lombard language, perceptions of the language across the border, questions of identity, and the interplay between politics and language. I followed a relational interviewing approach as described by Fujii (2018), favoring a conversational rather than strictly question–answer format. This approach was particularly appropriate for narrative inquiry, as "the data that interviewer and interviewee generate often take the form of narratives or stories" (Fujii, 2018, p. 3). As a member of the Lombard-speaking community myself, it felt natural to participate in the conversation and share relevant aspects of my own experience. In line with this approach, I avoided asking direct questions about identity. Instead, I sought to elicit stories through open-ended prompts in everyday language. For instance, rather than asking: "Do you feel a shared Lombard identity?", I asked: "What do you think you have in common with someone from Lombardy/Ticino?". Such prompts encouraged participants to reflect on and narrate their experiences in their own terms. I deliberately avoided using the term 'identity' in the interviews, as Linde-Laursen (2016) warns that doing so may lead participants to rely on well-established national or regional narratives rather than sharing personal, lived experiences. In addition, I followed threads of conversation that participants themselves

found meaningful, even when they did not seem directly related to language revitalization. For example, some participants spoke at length about their family histories and the villages where they came from. I believe that allowing space for these digressions helped participants construct rich narratives within the interviews, which resonates with the scope of narrative inquiry.

3.3   Data Analysis

After completing all the interviews, I manually transcribed them in the language in which they were conducted, with my mother assisting in the transcription of three interviews. Lombard does not have an official standardized orthography, and I was never formally taught how to write it, which made the transcription process particularly challenging. I briefly considered learning one of the proposed orthographic systems (such as *'Scriver Lombard'* or *'Noeuva Ortografia Lombarda'*, which I will revisit in Chapter 5), but due to time constraints, I decided to transcribe the interviews to the best of my ability, attempting to maintain a consistent approach. For the excerpts presented in the discussion, however, I wanted to preserve the original phonetic pronunciation, so I employed a phonetic transcription with traditional Ticinese spelling; I warmly thank my mother for helping me with the accents. Despite these challenges, manually transcribing each interview allowed me to engage deeply with the material and laid the groundwork for the subsequent analysis.

The interviews can broadly be categorized into two types: the majority contained personal narratives, while a smaller number—often involving participants with academic or institutional backgrounds—were more impersonal. These more factual responses were nevertheless valuable, particularly for understanding the broader socio-political context.

The next phase involved thematic coding, aimed at identifying common patterns in perceptions, practices, and feelings of belonging. I developed analytical codes, which,

as Hay and Cope (2021) describe, "dig deeper into the processes and into the context of phrases or actions." (p. 393). I found this approach especially appropriate for working with narratives, where the context and how something is expressed often carry as much meaning—if not more—than the content itself. Although each narrative was unique, I was able to trace recurring themes that connected individual experiences to broader borderland narratives.

Importantly, coding was not a linear process. Instead, it was iterative: I revisited the transcripts multiple times, and with each reading, new insights emerged from the stories that had been shared. My personal familiarity with the borderland context and the Lombard language significantly informed this process, enabling me to better situate and interpret participants' responses. I explore my own positionality and involvement in greater depth in the following section.

3.4   Positionality

Feminist geographers have challenged the notion of research as an objective practice, emphasizing instead the significance of the researcher's position within the field (Cuomo & Massaro, 2016). In my case, my position within the field was that of an insider. An 'insider' has been defined as a researcher who shares cultural, ethnic, racial, religious, or linguistic characteristics with their participants (Ganga & Scott, 2006).

I consider myself an insider not only because I come from the Swiss–Italian borderland, but also because Lombard is my mother tongue and thus I belong to the very community in which I conducted my interviews. Both my parents are from *Svizzera italiana*, specifically the Italian Grisons, and Lombard was the exclusive language spoken in our household. My parents have always been active in the local community, and my mother takes great pride in speaking Lombard and seizes every opportunity to use it. Their involvement and passion were passed down to me, shaping both my attachment to the region and my interest in the revitalization of its language. This insider status proved

to be a strength for my research. Many interviewees were enthusiastic that a young person not only cared about the topic but also still spoke the language— something increasingly rare in my generation—which encouraged them to open up more readily. My familiarity with local culture and political discourse also enabled me to grasp nuances in participants' narratives, and this shared ground fostered a depth of discussion that would have been impossible for an outsider to achieve.

At the same time, although my position within the community was a strength that enabled me to conduct this research, it also presented certain challenges and limitations. One key challenge was that I did not always feel like an insider. I am from the Swiss side of the border and at times I felt like an outsider when interviewing participants from Italy. Yet this boundary was not fixed: many Italian participants emphasized that we were part of the same cross-border community, particularly because of our shared language. The lack of a clear distinction between when I was 'the Other' and when I was not created a sense of ambiguity about my own identity. My experience aligns with criticisms of the supposed dichotomy between 'insider' versus 'outsider', a binary often criticized as overly simplistic (Mullings, 1999; Rubin, 2012). Instead, it has been argued that positionality should be understood as fluid and shifting across time and space, which closely reflects how I experienced my own position during fieldwork.

Investigating my community's identity forced me to turn inward and confront complex questions about my own sense of belonging.Through the research process, I reconnected with my Italian cultural heritage and began to question my Swiss identity. I experienced what Kondo calls a 'collapse of identity' (Kondo, 1990), a process that for me was marked by the loss of a previously secure sense of self and its subsequent reconstruction. In this reconstruction, I came to perceive myself as holding a more multi-layered spatial identity—Swiss Italian, and also Lombard. These tensions reshaped the way I approached fieldwork: it made me more attentive to participants' hesitations, contradictions, and ambivalence about identity. Rather than viewing these moments as

inconsistencies, I came to understand them as part of the lived reality of borderland identities.

Another challenge of being an insider was the blurring of my roles as researcher and community member. At times, I felt I was perceived less as a researcher and more as a member of the community. This created a vulnerable position and increased the risk of becoming too emotionally entangled in the research process. In hindsight, I realize that asserting my researcher identity more clearly and establishing firmer boundaries would have helped maintain balance. Maintaining "emotional and physical distance" (Cuomo & Massaro, 2016, p. 103) is an important consideration that I will carry forward into future research.

My positionality was also shaped by my gender and age. Presenting myself as a young female student often helped put interviewees at ease, as they did not feel intimidated. At the same time, there were moments when I sensed that I was not fully taken seriously as a researcher. Nevertheless, I was consistently treated with respect, and many participants even celebrated my presence, since it is rarer for women than men to speak Lombard. Overall, this combination of youth and gender shaped how I was perceived and influenced the ways participants engaged with me.

Lastly, because I am researching my own community, it felt essential to give something back. Since this thesis is written in English and uses academic language that may not be accessible to many participants, I plan to translate and reframe parts of it in Italian and Lombard. In doing so, I also hope to contribute to the language's revitalization—a cause I have grown increasingly committed to. I also intend to publicly present my findings in my home village and personally invite each interviewee. This event will provide an opportunity to discuss the future of the Lombard language. As the participants chose not to remain anonymous, there will be no breach of privacy.

Chapter 4

Borderland Context

In this chapter, I will explore the context of my research area—the borderland between Switzerland and Italy. For the purposes of this thesis, I define the borderland (see Figure 4.1) as comprising *Svizzera italiana* (Canton of Ticino and the Italian-speaking valleys of the Canton of Grisons) and the region of Lombardy. Although not all areas within these regions lie directly near the border, my interview partners were mostly located in places relatively close to it (i.e., northern Lombardy, Ticino, and Poschiavo). Moreover, elements of bordering dynamics were present in each interview, which supports my framing of the research area as a borderland. As I noted in Chapter 2, I draw on Yuval-Davis et al. (2019) conceptualization of borderlands as spaces where bordering processes affect inhabitants, rather than by strict geographical proximity to a state border.

I will not attempt to cover the full historical development of the border across several centuries. Instead, I will focus on the interaction between language and the border. In this research, I consider not only how the border is constructed from above—by the state—but also how it is contested by regionalist actors and reproduced in everyday life by ordinary people. This chapter will primarily focus on the top-down and regionalist construction of the border and its associated identities, while Chapter 5 will shift attention to the bottom-up dimension. I will begin with a brief historical overview and an examination of the nation-building processes in Italy and Switzerland, which constructed the political border and contributed to the stigmatization of Lombard as

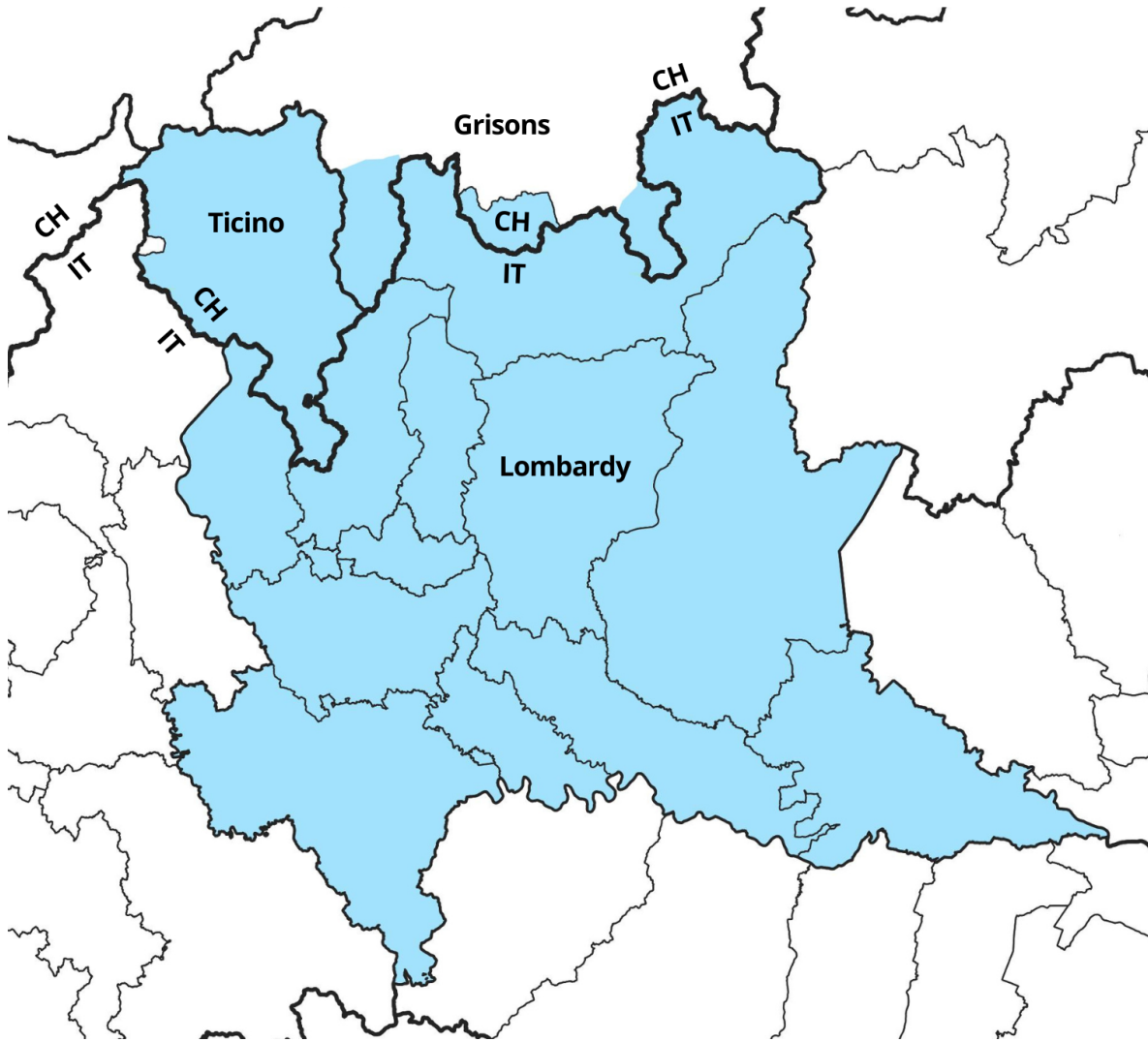Figure 4.1: Own Map. Depiction of Swiss-Italian Borderland.

a dialect. I will then focus on two regionalist political parties—one on each side of the border—that have engaged with questions of regional identity, bordering, and language. Finally, I will address the current status of the Lombard language and related language policies, drawing on both existing literature and insights from my interviews.

4.1 Historical Background

In this section, I will examine the emergence of the border between Italy and Switzerland, the subsequent formation of national identities, and the impact these developments had on pre-existing territorial and cultural legacies. Italy is commonly perceived as a linguistically and culturally uniform nation, where the Italian language is seen as both the sole national language and whose territorial extent coincides with the borders of the state itself. This narrative has been actively promoted by the Italian government and its institutions—sometimes subtly, sometimes explicitly—for more than a century. But is Italy truly as culturally homogeneous as this narrative suggests? And if the borders of a state are meant to reflect the boundaries of the nation, why does a political border exist to the south of Switzerland that separates a region which is linguistically and culturally Italian? To begin addressing these questions, I will first consider the processes that led to the creation of the Italian nation-state.

4.1.1 Italian Nation-building

Compared to other European countries, the Italian state emerged relatively late, only in the second half of the nineteenth century (Agnew, 2002). The movement for the unification of Italy—known as Risorgimento—was driven primarily by political elites seeking national reunification and cultural unity, rather than by the broader population. It has been described as essentially a "middle-class issue" and no significant mass movement emerged in support of unification (Ruzza, 2000, p. 4). The delay in unification can be attributed mainly to two key factors: the political influence of the papacy and the strong local cultural identities (Agnew, 2002). Prior to unification, the Italian peninsula was characterized by powerful city-states, municipal governments, republics, and other regional political entities, especially in the north (Agnew, 2002). These pre-existing forms of identification—whether religious or local—left little space for a unified Italian identity. Over time, however, these ministates came under foreign control, experiencing

domination by Austrian, Spanish, and French powers. This external rule contributed to a growing nationalist sentiment among intellectuals, who began to advocate for a unified Italian state (Agnew, 2002; 'La Regione Nel Tempo', 1999).

It is crucial to remember that unification was initiated from the north, particularly by the state of Piedmont, and was imposed on the rest of the peninsula and the islands. Especially in the south, there was significant resistance to unification strong (Agnew, 2002; Ruzza, 2000). This north-led unification process gave rise to a persistent North-South divide, as the industrializing North took political control over a largely feudal South, often through alliances with local elites (Ruzza, 2000). In my view, this historical trajectory underscores the constructed nature of a nation-state: its borders and identity are not natural or inevitable but rather invented.

Unification sought not only political unity but also cultural—and therefore linguistic. The goal of nationalists during European state-building was that of coinciding nation and language borders strongly influenced by the French model of 'one nation – one language – one state' (May, 2012; Ruzza, 2008; Szul, 2010; Vizi, 2016). The idea of a close link between language and nation was itself a product of German Romanticism and spread among Italian intellectuals as well (De Mauro, 1991). However, this concern for linguistic unity was largely irrelevant to most Italians at the time, who primarily spoke regional languages that were later downgraded to the status of 'dialects'(Coluzzi, 2006; Ruzza, 2000; Screti, 2024; Tamburelli & Tosco, 2021). There is, however, some debate regarding the role of the Italian language during the time of unification. Some scholars argue that Italian—based on 14th-century Florentine and used among intellectuals from the 14th to the 16th century—was scarcely spoken by the general population during unification, with estimates suggesting as little as 2.5% of Italians used it (Coluzzi, 2006; De Mauro, 1991). Others offer a more optimistic view, suggesting that a simplified form of Italian mixed with regional languages had already begun to spread before state intervention (Bianconi, 2002; Bruni, 1992). Nevertheless, it was not until the 1950s that a "relatively uniform national spoken norm" began to replace regional languages—driven

by mass migration from the South to the North and the spread of television (Ruzza, 2000, p. 6). Regardless of how widespread Italian was during the 19th century, the fact remains that the state actively suppressed regional languages, and this legacy continues to influence linguistic dynamics today. Still, despite decades of marginalization, these regional languages—although endangered—are still spoken across Italy.

At last Italy was officially unified in 1861. However, a strong national identity was never forged. The elite's vision of a centralized, unified nation-state was never fully realized, largely because ordinary people were not fully convinced of it—and in some cases, openly resisted it. As I emphasized in Chapter 2, the construction of a national identity depends on the active participation of everyday people. In Italy's case, national consciousness has remained relatively weak (Galli della Loggia, 1998; Pace, 1999). One clear indication of this is the persistence of a strong attachment to localism after unification (Agnew, 2002; Pace, 1999). The deep linguistic and social divisions across the country have also hindered the development of a cohesive national identity. Italy's political borders never aligned with existing linguistic boundaries, and as a result, multiple identities continue to coexist and are actively reproduced at different territorial scales.

Further weakening of national identity can be traced to more recent history. Fascism attempted to enforce cultural unity and impose standard Italian, but these efforts failed and, arguably, attached a lasting negative connotation to Italian national identity (Agnew, 2002; Ruzza, 2000). Moreover, perceptions of Italy as politically corrupt, economically backwards in the European context, and bureaucratically inefficient have contributed to widespread disillusionment (Agnew, 2002; Ruzza, 2000). All these factors help explain why many Italians either reject a national identity altogether or subordinate it to stronger regional or local affiliations.

4.1.2 The Myth of Switzerland

Returning to the initial questions, how is it that a region in Switzerland that linguistically and culturally belong to the Italian nation? In fact, Switzerland is the only country outside Italy where Italian is recognized as a national language (Lurati, 1992). Historically, prior to 1500, this region formed part of the Duchy of Milan, which included much of Lombardy (Morinini, 2021). The territory that today encompasses approximately *Svizzera italiana* and Lombardy was politically unified, with no border separating the two. This situation began to change after the Swiss Confederates occupied the territory south of the San Gottardo Pass—what we now call Ticino.

The Swiss Confederation itself originated in 1291 as a defensive alliance among three German-speaking Cantons—Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden—established to resist the growing influence of surrounding powers, particularly the Habsburgs (Fahrni, 1994; Grin, 1998; Kużelewska, 2016). Thus, in its early days, Switzerland was only German-speaking (Kużelewska, 2016). During the 15th century, the Confederation expanded through military campaigns, reaching into territories south of the Alps to secure control over crucial trade routes, particularly the San Gottardo Pass (Fahrni, 1994; Lurati, 1992). This expansion continued until 1512, by which time the area of modern-day Ticino was fully annexed (Lurati, 1992; Morinini, 2021). However, Ticino was not granted the status of Canton; rather, it was administered as bailiwicks—territories subjected to the Confederation (Fahrni, 1994; Lurati, 1992). In contrast, the Italian-speaking areas of the Grisons— the Italian Grisons—were in a different position. They were considered allies and, at the time, even dominated over the neighboring Lombard territory: Valtellina (Fahrni, 1994). As a consequence, this distinct political status shaped different identities than in Ticino. As a native of the Italian Grisons, I can confirm that this divergence still last today, a point I will elaborate on later in the thesis.

Although the southern territories no longer belonged politically to the Duchy of Milan,

cultural and linguistic continuity persisted. The Swiss occupation was not characterized by strong military imposition, and the power of Swiss jurisdiction was limited (Lurati, 1992). Nevertheless, the power shift can still be understood as a form of colonization—a foreign authority took over governance. While cultural assimilation was minimal or perhaps not even intended at the time, I would argue that the term 'bailiwick' is interchangeable with 'colony'. Cultural and religious traditions remained Lombard well into the 16th through 18th centuries, a perception shared on both sides of the Alps (Lurati, 1992). Until Ticino's official recognition as a Canton in 1803, its inhabitants largely identified as ethnically Lombard, and no clear concept of a Swiss Italian identity existed (Lurati, 1992; Morinini, 2021). To me, this challenges the legitimacy of the border between Switzerland and Italy as a natural line of separation and supports the argument that borders are intentionally constructed, as discussed in Chapter 2.

One of the clearest markers of a Lombard culture across both Ticino and the Italian Grisons was the use of a shared (regional) language: first Lombard, later Italian. Until the 15th century, Lombard remained the main language on the territory. According to linguist Bianconi (2002), two main forces helped advance the diffusion of Italian in *Svizzera italiana* in the 1500s: the Counter-Reformation and emigration. It should be noted that Bianconi supports relatively optimistic estimates regarding Italian's spread at the time of Italian unification. Following this reasoning, Bongrani and Morgana (1992) suggest that in Lombardy too, the Counter-Reformation played a central role in promoting Italianization. Still, this was only a partial Italianization; Lombard continued to be the main language of everyday communication for many years. Initial literacy efforts led by Carlo Borromeo focused on teaching Italian as a means to counter the influence of the Reformation (Bianconi, 2002). In Alpine regions in particular, emigration fostered the need for written communication, and Florentine Italian was already the standard written language (Bianconi, 2002).

Despite the use of Italian and Lombard, neither was officially recognized in Switzerland until the arrival of Napoleon and the creation of the short-lived Helvetic Republic

in 1798 (Fahrni, 1994; Kużelewska, 2016; Morinini, 2021). This centralized republic recognized Italian, French, and German as official languages (Morinini, 2021). It is notable that this recognition came from revolutionary France, which had established the 'one nation–one language–one state' model and favored standardized national languages over regional ones like Swiss German or Lombard. At the time, Italian was the sole written language, as Lombard lacked a standardized written form. The choice was therefore a practical one, since Italian could be taught in schools and used for official documents. Yet this legitimization of Italian also inadvertently fostered the perception of Lombard as secondary and less prestigious.

Ticino finally gained Canton status through the Act of Mediation in 1803 (Lurati, 1992). It is significant that this status was granted by Napoleon rather than the Swiss Confederates—another indication, in my view, that the previous status of Ticino resembled that of a colony. The Act of Mediation also marked the political separation of Ticino from Lombardy and the institutionalization of a new border (Bianconi, 2002). According to Lurati (1992), it is only from 1803 onward that the notion of 'Swiss Italians' becomes applicable. However, this identity did not emerge solely from the establishment of a political border; it was gradually negotiated by the people of the region and remains far from homogeneous. As I will discuss in Chapter 5, residents of the Italian Grisons—spread across four geographically distinct valleys—often do not identify with Ticino.

According to Bianconi (2002), two events were particularly important in shaping a sense of Swiss Italian identity, distinct from both Italy and the rest of Switzerland: the opening of the Gotthard Tunnel in 1882 and the threat posed by Italian Fascism in the 1930s and 1940s. The tunnel connected the southern and northern regions of Switzerland, increasing the presence—economic, cultural, and linguistic—of German-speaking Swiss in the south. This often took on paternalistic or even arrogant forms. Some intellectuals began to warn of the threat of 'Germanization' and actively engaged to defend Ticino's Italian heritage. Later, during the Fascist era, the Swiss nature of

Svizzera italiana was emphasized in the media as a way to distance it from Mussolini's Italy.

The modern Swiss state, as we know it today, was established in 1848, following a brief civil war between Catholic and Protestant Cantons. Its first modern federal constitution recognized German, French, and Italian as national languages with equal rights (Fahrni, 1994; Grin, 1998). Unlike Napoleon's centralized Helvetic Republic, the 1848 Swiss state was federal in structure, with sovereignty resting primarily with the Cantons (Grin, 1998). In an era dominated by the rise of nationalism—where the ideal was a unified nation with one language and one culture—Switzerland stood out as a unique case. Instead of becoming a reason for drifts and secession, its pluralistic, federal model was turned into the very essence of the Swiss nation, a so-called 'nation of the will' (Grin, 1998). Both domestically and abroad, Switzerland has been idealized as a perfect model of peaceful coexistence among multiple languages and cultures.

I am not claiming that this narrative is entirely false, but instead I want to highlight problematic aspects that are often overlooked. First, linguistic equality was not born out of altruism of the winning Protestant Cantons but was a political concession meant to reassure Catholic Cantons fearing the loss of autonomy (Grin, 1998). Second, while Switzerland is officially multilingual, most of its citizens are monolingual, learning a second national language at school with often unsatisfying results (Kużelewska, 2016). The Swiss language model is deeply territorial: each national language dominates a specific region, with only a few transitional zones (Grin, 1998; Kużelewska, 2016). Third and most importantly, despite the formal equality of the national languages, German has always held a dominant position because it is spoken by the majority of the population (Kużelewska, 2016). Tensions between German- and French-speaking regions have existed historically and continue today (Fahrni, 1994). Romansh, the fourth national language, was only officially recognized in 1938 and is often forgotten in national discourse. The language is currently in rapid decline and was recognized primarily for strategic political reasons—to distance Switzerland from Nazi Germany

(Zierhofer, 2005). Italian, too, is marginalized, holding a much weaker position than German or French (Grin, 1998; Kużelewska, 2016; Lurati, 1992). *Svizzera italiana* as a region is discriminated as a minority (Kuntz, 2009). Moreover, while Switzerland takes pride in its linguistic inclusivity, by respecting and recognizing each language, the reality is more complex. The most widely spoken language is Swiss German, yet only Standard German is officially recognized (Kużelewska, 2016). Swiss German is considered as a dialect and has never been standardized. This presents a challenge for Italian-, and French-speaking citizens, who are taught Standard German in school but must often navigate informal communication in Swiss German. Meanwhile, another regional language—Lombard—has been completely sidelined. Following the example of Italy, it was dismissed as a mere dialect and remains unrecognized. Today, Lombard is in decline in Italian-speaking Switzerland, mirroring its situation in Lombardy itself, which I will discuss later.

4.2   Political Framework

This part focuses on the regional context of the borderland that led to the emergence of its two main regionalist, populist, right-wing parties: the Lega Nord (usually translated as Northern League) in Lombardy and the Lega dei Ticinesi in Ticino. The focus on these parties is due to the central role they played in politicizing regional—against national—identities, the border, and the Lombard language.

In the 1980s and 1990s, dominant notions of Italy as a centralized, unitary state on the one hand, and Switzerland as a pluralist state where all Cantons held equal power on the other, were challenged by two emerging parties: the Lega Nord in Lombardy and the Lega dei Ticinesi in Ticino. In order to oppose their respective states, both parties politically instrumentalized regional identities—a blend of pre-existing and newly constructed elements. This shift toward regionalism and the rise of regionalist parties in the 1990s was not coincidental, as regionalism experienced a resurgence across Europe

during that time (Giordano, 2000). There were, indeed, many shared aspects between the two parties that blurred the border between Switzerland and Italy. However, there were also explicit politics of re-bordering, particularly from the Ticino side.

4.2.1 The Borderland

After discussing the state formation of both Italy and Switzerland and the origin of the border, I will now describe the current situation and the main political and economic factors that have shaped more recent bordering processes.

The Swiss-Italian borderland shares two languages: Italian and Lombard. While Italian is not unique to the borderland, Lombard, as a regional language, is. Another key feature of this region is its high level of economic integration since the late 1990s (Biancalana & Mazzoleni, 2020). Although Switzerland is not a member of the European Union, it became part of the Schengen Area, which allows for the free movement of people (Mazzoleni & Mueller, 2017). This period of border opening and the general weakening of national boundaries was largely influenced by globalization and led to closer cross-border relationships (Mazzoleni & Mueller, 2017). However, these relations are marked by strong economic asymmetries—particularly the very high number of cross-border workers who commute daily from Lombardy to Ticino in search of better job opportunities and higher wages (Leimgruber, 1991). Today it is estimated that over 70,000 people cross the border for work every day, compared to Ticino's total population of around 350,000 (Biancalana & Mazzoleni, 2020; Leimgruber, 1991; Mazzoleni, 2021; Mazzoleni & Mueller, 2017). It goes without saying that this arrangement is more advantageous for Lombards, who can work in Switzerland without fully emigrating or learning a new language (Biancalana & Mazzoleni, 2020). Still, the situation has created social tensions and shaped public perceptions on both sides of the border (Leimgruber, 1991). As I will show later, this issue was politically instrumentalized by the Lega dei Ticinesi, contributing to the shaping of *Svizzera italiana*'s already complex identities.

Svizzera italiana faces a unique identity challenge, stemming from its minority status: politically it belongs to Switzerland, but culturally it remains tied to Italy (Leimgruber, 1991). Lombardy, by contrast, does not share this dilemma, as it is both politically and culturally Italian. Of course, the Lega Nord did challenge this statement with its secessionist rhetoric, but the official language of Lombardy remains Italian, which corresponds to the national majority language. As Bianconi (2002) discusses, the border in *Svizzera italiana* can be interpreted in two ways: either as a static barrier that protects cultural and territorial homogeneity from external influences, or as a dynamic space of contact that enriches identity. Looking at the rise of the Lega dei Ticinesi, it appears that—although the latter view has existed historically— the former interpretation has dominated. In particular, the openness of the 1990s seems to have triggered a defensive, identity-based closure (Marcacci, 2009). There were some attempts at economic and cultural collaboration during the 1990s, especially between Ticino and parts of Lombardy. These efforts were formalized in a cross-border association known as *Regio Insubrica*. However, this initiative lacked a strong political dimension and never evolved into a concrete political project (Leimgruber, 1991; Marcacci, 2009).

This is the borderland context in which the two regionalist parties emerged. I will now look more closely at each, starting with the Northern League.

4.2.2 Northern League

The Northern League was founded in 1991 by merging several regional or autonomist leagues that had emerged in Northern Italy during the 1980s. The two main ones were the Lombard League in Lombardy, led by Umberto Bossi (who would later become the leader of the unified party), and the Venetian League in Veneto (Agnew, 1995, 2002; Biancalana & Mazzoleni, 2020; Giordano, 2000; Ruzza, 2000; Tossutti, 2001). These movements had explicit ethnic undertones and emphasized ethnoregional differences—such as regional language, behavior, and attitudes—using slogans like "the

region as nation" to evoke "a sense of regional territory a source of cultural identity." (Agnew, 1995, p. 166).

I argue that the Northern League's emergence was enabled by a specific set of political factors that created a particularly favorable moment: the collapse of the First Republic, a perceived economic decline in Northern Italy, and a long-standing localism that had never fully disappeared in Italian society.

Simplified, the First Republic refers to the long era of political stagnation between 1947 and 1992, when the center-right Christian Democratic Party governed without ever alternating with its main rival, the Communist Party (Agnew, 1995, 2002). This system collapsed in 1992 following a major corruption scandal uncovered in Milan, which implicated the traditional parties (Agnew, 2002; Pace, 1999). This vacuum allowed new political actors—such as the Northern League—to gain support from disillusioned voters. In many parts of Italy, strong regional patterns of political loyalty had developed over decades: for example, the Northeast (including Lombardy) was a stronghold of the Christian Democrats ('the whites'), while central Italy, notably Emilia Romagna, was aligned with the Communists ('the reds') (Agnew, 1995, 2002; Pace, 1999). These political legacies closely influenced regional identities. This background helps explain why the Northern League succeeded in Lombardy—essentially taking up votes from Christian Democrats—whereas in neighboring Emilia Romagna, the left-wing identity remained dominant (Agnew, 1995, 2002).

The second factor was the widespread fear in Northern Italy that economic prosperity was declining—an anxiety the Northern League exploited effectively (Giordano, 2000). Despite being the wealthiest regions in the country, Northern Italy still feared being economically dragged down by the South (Ruzza, 2000). The League capitalized on this perception, constructing a narrative in which the industrious North was being exploited by the parasitic South (Ruzza, 2000). As Giordano (2000) summarizes, the discourse was constructed as such: "the South of Italy (and especially Rome) [. . .] is the cause for all that is wrong with Italian society and politics." (p. 454). In this way,

the Northern League exemplifies the kind of economic regionalism seen in other wealthy regions such as Catalonia or Flanders (Giordano, 2000). However, I argue that Italy's unique political constellation in the 1990s added a novel dimension to the Northern League's rhetoric. In contrast to other regionalist movements, the League adopted a populist, aggressive framing of the political elites—especially those in Rome—as corrupt, due to recent scandals. Early on, the League's main enemy was the corrupt political class in Rome, accused of redistributing Northern wealth to the 'backward' South. Of course, immigrants were also portrayed negatively, alongside Southern Italians (Giordano, 2000).

The third contributing factor was not new, but a persistent challenge to Italian nationalism: the presence of strong local identities throughout the country. Especially amid growing dissatisfaction with the centralized political elite in Rome, the Northern League tapped into local identifications in Lombardy to support secessionist claims. To support its demands, the party even sought to construct a new regional identity: Padania, where anti-Southern rhetoric and the instrumentalization of the Lombard language were central to this effort.

Between 1996 and 2000, Bossi undertook a deliberate project to institutionalize this notion of Padania (Agnew, 2002). This identity was not grounded in historical or geographical fact but was invented as a symbolic entity to support the League's secessionist aspirations (Giordano, 2000; Pace, 1999). As part of this effort, the League promoted the idea of a "lingua padana", encompassing the various regional dialects of the North, to foster a sense of shared linguistic and cultural identity (Pace, 1999, p. 64). Despite these efforts, the project ultimately failed. Surveys at the time showed that people in the North maintained layered identities—strong local affiliations coexisting with varying degrees of national attachment (Agnew, 2002). Regional identification (e.g., as Lombard) always remained weaker than both local and national identities (Agnew, 1995). In other words, it is difficult to create a new regional identity from scratch—especially one

with no historical grounding—and nearly impossible to impose it over well-established local attachments.

The invention of the term *'lingua padana'* was not Bossi's first attempt to instrumentalize language for political purposes. As Giordano (2000) explains, language serves as a powerful resource for political mobilization. As discussed in Chapter 2, the link between language and territory is rooted in the role that language can assume as marker of boundaries. The Lombard League—precursor to the Northern League—had already used regional language of Lombardy as a marker of ethnic distinctiveness and political legitimacy, referring to it as "the language of the Lombardy Nation" (Ruzza, 2000, p. 9). Traditionally known as many 'dialects', they were elevated as historically repressed language, cast in opposition to standard Italian, which was portrayed as the language of Rome and the corrupt political elite (Ruzza, 2008). Activists even altered street signs and revived traditional songs, poems, and sayings (Ruzza, 2008). While there is some undeniable historical truth to claims of linguistic repression—given Italy's language policies—there is reason to question the League's sincerity regarding language revitalization. Indeed, once this reliance on language politics revealed its practical limitations, it was quickly dropped. In a region like Lombardy, which had experienced decades of internal migration from the South, many potential supporters did not speak local language fluently (Agnew, 1995; Ruzza, 2000). Recognizing this, the League replaced its exclusionary language strategy with a colloquial variant of Italian more accessible to voters (Ruzza, 2000). This shift also allowed the League to redefine its target: the Other was no longer Southern migrants per se, but only the distant, corrupt elite in Rome (Ruzza, 2000).

As several of my interviewees confirmed, the League's use of Lombard was seen as superficial and opportunistic. I will elaborate on this further in the Discussion. Coluzzi (2006) similarly notes: "the Northern League's interest in the promotion of the various regional languages of Northern Italy has been shown to be very limited and mostly instrumental" (p. 468). In practice, little remains of the League's early promises to

revitalize Lombard, as its focus was always more economic than linguistic (Coluzzi, 2006).

Like many populist movements, the Northern League has shown a chameleonic political character, adjusting its political stance based on strategic needs. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, it oscillated between secessionist and federalist positions depending on whether it sought to enter government coalitions, often aligning with nationalist parties (Mazzoleni & Ruzza, 2018). For the same reason, it also shifted from a pro-European to a Eurosceptic stance by the late 1990s (Chari et al., 2004). A major transformation occurred between 2013 and 2017, when Matteo Salvini took over the leadership. Under him, the party rebranded from a regionalist movement into a nationalist one, claiming to represent the entire Italian population. The reference to the North was dropped, and the party became simply the League (Newth, 2024). Still, regionalist demands have remained relevant in Northern Italy, as shown by the autonomy referendums held in 2017 in both Lombardy and Veneto, which Salvini supported (Giovannini & Vampa, 2020; Mazzoleni & Ruzza, 2018).

4.2.3 Lega dei Ticinesi

Before discussing the Lega dei Ticinesi, it is important to make a preliminary clarification. As the name indicates, this political phenomenon pertains exclusively to the Canton of Ticino and not to the Italian Grisons. As previously noted, Italian Grisons exhibit different identity patterns compared to Ticino. Furthermore, the Lega's emergence as a cantonal movement is linked to Ticino's unique status as the only fully Italian-speaking canton in Switzerland, whereas the Canton of Grisons is majority German-speaking and possesses greater political leverage at the national level.

The Lega dei Ticinesi emerged in 1991, coinciding with the rise of the Northern League in Italy, not as a formal party but as a movement, under the leadership of Giuliano Bignasca and Flavio Maspoli.. Its roots lie in the free newspaper *'Il Mattino della Domenica'*, established a year prior (De Lauretis & Giussani, 1992). The socio-economic

context of early 1990s Ticino was marked by increasing European integration and a growing influx of cross-border workers from Italy. While Ticino remained attractive to these workers, its economy was structurally weaker than the Swiss average and characterized by persistently higher unemployment (Mazzoleni, 2017). At the same time, the political system of Ticino was seen as stagnant, dominated for decades by the Liberal-Radical and Christian-Democratic parties, which many perceived as unresponsive to the local economic crisis (Mazzoleni, 2005, 2017).

In this context, it is unsurprising that a movement claiming to represent the people from Ticino against the political elites in Bern, using provocative rhetoric and unorthodox populist methods, achieved rapid success (Albertazzi, 2007; De Lauretis & Giussani, 1992). Although the Lega officially rejected ideological categorization and defined itself simply as a movement of 'the people', it has consistently leaned toward the right (De Lauretis & Giussani, 1992). Since its inception, it has established itself as a major political force at the cantonal level, though it has never attempted to expand nationally (Albertazzi, 2007; Mazzoleni, 2021). Importantly, its success represented a significant departure from Ticino's previous political orientation, which had traditionally been closer to the left-leaning, French-speaking cantons (De Lauretis & Giussani, 1992). According to my interviewees, the party's dominance has been somewhat challenged in recent years by the national right-wing Swiss People's Party (SVP), though it remains a key actor in Ticino's political landscape.

The Lega dei Ticinesi has consistently campaigned on three interrelated themes: hostility toward cross-border Italian workers, demands for greater cantonal autonomy within the Swiss federal system, and strong opposition to both European integration and the perceived cultural and economic colonization of Ticino by the Swiss-German majority—often personified by the federal government in Bern (Mazzoleni & Mueller, 2017; Mazzoleni & Ruzza, 2018). These positions are epitomized in one of its slogans: "Ticino to the Ticinesi"[1], which is explicitly xenophobic and anti-Berne (Bianconi, 2002,

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[1]Own tranlsation from Italian.

p. 215). The Lega actively politicized territorial identity by invoking emotionally resonant expressions such as "our people" and "Ticino and its people"[2] portraying the population as inherently tied to the land (Bianconi, 2002, p. 214).

Compared to the Northern League, the role of the Lombard language in the Lega dei Ticinesi's political project has been more limited, as noted in my interviews as well. Lombard was featured in slogans of political campaigns and as titles on *'Il Mattino della Domenica'* (De Lauretis & Giussani, 1992). In this context, language served as a marker of authenticity, symbolizing the Lega's rootedness in local traditions: "The Lega tells the truth—and can afford to tell it to you in your own language"[3] (De Lauretis & Giussani, 1992, p. 65). However, unlike the Northern League, the Lega dei Ticinesi never claimed the existence of a unified Lombard language. Instead, it continued to refer to local varieties as the Ticinese dialect—a mainstream term that avoids asserting a broader linguistic unity.This stance is consistent with the party's strong anti-Lombard worker sentiment. Acknowledging a shared linguistic heritage would have undermined the Lega's effort to construct cultural boundaries between Ticinesi and Lombards. While cultural similarities across the border are undeniable, the Lega strategically downplayed them in order to sustain its exclusionary and populist narrative.

4.2.4   De-bordering and Re-bordering Strategies

As demonstrated above, both the Northern League and the Lega dei Ticinesi are right-wing, regionalist populist movements that emerged in the same borderland. While rooted in different national contexts—Italy and Switzerland respectively—both parties have engaged in complex processes of de-bordering and re-bordering, strategically employing the border as a political instrument to serve their aims (Mazzoleni & Mueller, 2017). Despite Giuliano Bignasca's initial resistance to drawing parallels, the Lega dei

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[2]Ibid.
[3]Ibid.

Ticinesi was clearly influenced by the Northern League. Founded later, it emulated the latter's populist rhetoric and communication style (De Lauretis & Giussani, 1992). The two parties share key features: opposition to their respective central governments (Rome and Bern), rejection of the traditional party systems, use of provocative and vulgar language, and appeals to a unified, 'authentic' people portrayed as victims of political elites and external threats (Albertazzi, 2007; De Lauretis & Giussani, 1992). These parallels produced a symbolic form of de-bordering, fostering a sense of commonality across the border and reinforcing a kind of transnational regionalism (Mazzoleni & Mueller, 2017).

However, at the same time both parties also engaged in significant re-bordering practices. The most important of these lies in their respective territorial ambitions. The Lega dei Ticinesi never advocated secession from Switzerland (Albertazzi, 2007; De Lauretis & Giussani, 1992). Unlike the Northern League, which pursued independence from Italy, the Lega dei Ticinesi operated within the relatively autonomous framework of the Swiss federal system. Full secession was economically and politically unfeasible, especially given Ticino's economic dependence on the rest of Switzerland. Instead, the party focused on enhancing cantonal autonomy while maintaining a Swiss national identity—necessary to legitimize its anti-Italian discourse and distinguish Ticinesi from Italian outsiders (De Lauretis & Giussani, 1992). Although it promoted a 'Ticino First' agenda and showed open resentment toward Swiss-Germans, the party nevertheless proudly participated in national celebrations such as Swiss National Day (Mazzoleni & Ruzza, 2018). Both parties opposed globalization, but their stance on European integration diverged. While the Lega dei Ticinesi was Eurosceptic from its inception, the Northern League initially supported the European project and only adopted an anti-EU stance later (Mazzoleni & Ruzza, 2018). A central pillar of the Lega dei Ticinesi's re-bordering strategy has been the stigmatization of cross-border workers from Lombardy. These workers were portrayed as a threat to the local labor market and identity of Ticino, thus reinforcing symbolic and practical borders between the two regions.

On the Italian side, such re-bordering was less pronounced. The Northern League, saw Switzerland's federal model as a political template to emulate and maintained amicable ties with the Lega dei Ticinesi (De Lauretis & Giussani, 1992; Mazzoleni & Mueller, 2017). During Switzerland's 2014 referendum campaign 'Against Mass Immigration', which was supported by the Lega dei Ticinesi and explicitly targeted Italian workers, the Northern League adopted a contradictory stance. On the one hand it framed the vote as a legitimate exercise of Swiss national sovereignty, while on the other it defended the rights of Italian cross-border workers (Biancalana & Mazzoleni, 2020).

Finally, another notable difference lies in the use of language. The Northern League sought to construct a unified Lombard linguistic identity as part of its ethno-regionalist narrative, whereas the Lega dei Ticinesi never attempted to do this. As discussed previously, it employed the term 'Ticinese dialect' rather than promoting any broader recognition of Lombard as a language, avoiding any linguistic unity that might undermine its exclusionary stance toward Italian workers.

These inconsistencies illustrate the fluid, adaptive nature of populist discourse on both sides of the border. Populist actors can simultaneously engage in both de-bordering and re-bordering strategies, depending on what best serves their political interests (Mazzoleni & Mueller, 2017; Mazzoleni & Ruzza, 2018). Both the Northern League and the Lega dei Ticinesi are, of course, shaped by the border—their very existence as two separate parties reflects it—but once formed, they strategically instrumentalize the border, as well as the language politics surrounding it, turning them into flexible tools to consolidate their political power. I believe that this dual strategy demonstrates that borders are not static geographical entities but are socially and politically constructed. They are constantly renegotiated—not only by institutional actors, but also, as will be further explored in Chapter 5, by ordinary people in their everyday lives.

4.3   Language Policy and Planning

This last section investigates the state of Lombard as a contested language comparing its status in Italy and Switzerland, in order to provide the context in which grassroots revitalization efforts have emerged—which will be discussed later through the initiatives of my interview participants. Importantly, I want to emphasize that my research is not a linguistic analysis, but rather a discussion of language from a political geography perspective. The information below is provided for context and I am aware that it is subject to debate, as some linguists may disagree.

Italy's long-standing monolingual national ideology has upheld standard Italian as the only official language, relegating other regional languages—commonly and misleadingly called 'dialects'—to a position of inferiority (Screti, 2024). Despite the existence of between 35 to 40 historical languages in Italy, only twelve are officially recognized as minority languages and most of these are spoken outside of Italy as well (Coluzzi, 2006, 2008, 2019; Tamburelli & Tosco, 2021). The term 'dialect' in Italy reflects a political (or at least sociolinguistic) stance rather than linguistic reality, as many of these varieties, such as Lombard, evolved directly from Latin and are not derived from standard Italian, that came from one particular region of Italy (Tuscany) (Coluzzi, 2006, 2008, 2019). The dialectisation has been part of the broader nation-building project enforcing a monolingual model of 'one nation-one language-one state' (Screti, 2024). In contrast, in *Svizzera italiana*, while Lombard varieties have been stigmatized and have declined—especially since the 1970s due to social and economic change (Bianconi, 1980; Casoni, 2018)—there was no equivalent centralist campaign. During my interviews, however, I encountered contrasting perspectives on the situation in Switzerland: one linguist from Ticino saw the decline of Lombard as a natural linguistic evolution; a Ticinese activist contested this, arguing that it had been deliberately oppressed by cantonal authorities; and a linguist from Lombardy, coming from a different national context, was puzzled that Lombard was never officially recognized, given Switzerland's

pluralist, multilingual traditions. Drawing on my research into the history of the borderland, I believe that strong cultural ties with Lombardy, combined with the influence of Italian linguistic ideologies, have shaped Swiss Italian attitudes towards Lombard. As a result, conceptualizations of Lombard have often mirrored those in Italy, leading to similar marginalization despite the different political context.

4.3.1 Language Distribution

Lombard is a Gallo-Italic language part of the Gallo-Romance group (Tamburelli & Brasca, 2018) spoken primarily in the Lombardy region of Italy, in the Italian-Switzerland with extensions into eastern Piedmont and western Trentino (Coluzzi et al., 2018, 2021; Sanga, 1997). Despite regional variation, including distinctions between Western, Eastern, Alpine, and peripheral varieties (Coluzzi et al., 2021), many linguists agree that these forms share enough linguistic features to be considered one language (see Coluzzi et al., 2018; Tamburelli, 2024). Recent estimates suggest that 3 to 3.5 million people in Lombardy alone can speak Lombard, though usage extends beyond the region (Coluzzi, 2019; Coluzzi et al., 2018). This number is in rapid decline being mostly spoken by elderly and with a higher percentage of men (Coluzzi, 2008); Lombard is highly endangered and facing extinction if current trends persist (Coluzzi, 2019; Coluzzi et al., 2018).

In the map below (Figure 4.2) I propose a distribution of Lombard varieties based on various classifications (such as Biondelli, 1853; Coluzzi et al., 2018; Sanga, 1997) and a conversation with an interview partner. I do not claim that my proposal should be taken as the absolute truth but instead as a simplified visualisation, as linguistic boundaries of Lombard are still contested. As a matter of fact, it is impossible to define with certainty where a linguistic border is as they are necessarily fuzzy (Tamburelli & Tosco, 2021). Furthermore, there are even many linguists that oppose the notion of it being a language in the first place as criticised for example by Coluzzi (2019) and Tamburelli and Tosco (2021), because they rely on sociolinguistic criteria that only consider its lack of

official status, a standard (koiné) and lower prestige in relationship to Italian (Coluzzi, 2006). In fact, as for today Lombardy is spoken in a regime of diglossia, meaning that nobody speaks Lombard without also being able speaking Italian (Miola, 2013). According to Screti (2024) the notion of only being one official language in Italy which is a product of nation-building trickles down from academia to everyday discourses and practices through education and the press. This process has contributed to the so-called intelligibility myth, whereby speakers perceive varieties from different localities as inherently unintelligible, despite their actual linguistic closeness (Tamburelli, 2024). There is however an interesting phenomenon currently taking place that is the grassroot revitalization efforts involving ordinary people who actively try to debunk this notion as well as the intelligibility myth.

4.3.2 Official Status

The Lombard language finds itself in a precarious position due to the lack of official recognition in both Italy and Switzerland, rendering it a "contested language"—a term used by Tamburelli and Tosco (2021) to describe languages that are often documented in international linguistic atlases, such as Ethnologue (ISO 639-3: lmo) and UNESCO's World Atlas of Languages, yet remain unrecognized by the state in which they are spoken. In Italy, Although Lombardy passed a new Regional Law (no. 130/2016) to protect and promote Lombard, this initiative—while welcomed by activists—has faced backlash from national institutions and the media (Coluzzi et al., 2021; Tamburelli, 2024). Regarding the political situation, in Lombardy it was the Northern League, a right-wing party, that showed more interest towards the protection of Lombard (Coluzzi et al., 2021), even if this interest is mostly instrumental. As a result, the Left distanced itself from language promotion, despite earlier, in the 1960s, it was left-wing small autonomist parties in Italy who addressed regional languages (Coluzzi, 2006). Coluzzi et al. (2018) suggests that going forward genuine revitalization should be sustained by politicians from both the Right and the Left, free from ideological manipulation.

In Switzerland, the situation is not more favourable: despite the presence of the two institutions *Osservatorio Linguistico della Svizzera italiana* (OLSI) and *Centro di Dialettologia e Etnografia* (CDE), the language lacks official recognition. The CDE mainly focuses on historical linguistics, documenting older dialect forms through etymological and lexical research, while the OLSI adopts a sociolinguistic approach, examining current usage, including census data on dialect speakers. Nonetheless, the decline of Lombard is seen as a natural process, as there is no resistance from the population, at least according to the linguists I spoke with. I found two initiatives one by a right[4] - and on by a left-wing party[5] to introduce Ticinese dialect into schools have not gained much traction. While dialect use is no longer stigmatized and is finding new informal uses online, statistical data do not show an increase in speakers, particularly among youth (Casoni, 2018). Without a significant shift in political and institutional frameworks on both sides of the border, the future of Lombard remains gravely endangered. This concern was echoed by many of my interviewees, who as a result engaged in grassroots revitalization efforts to promote Lombard—an aspect that will be explored in the following chapter.

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[4]Marioli, N. (2018, June 19). "Dalle parole ai fatti: Corsi di dialetto nelle scuole elementari di Lugano". Sei Consiglieri Comunali leghisti presentano una mozione: "Proponiamo l'entrata in vigore con l'anno scolastico 2017-18." Liberatv. https://www.liberatv.ch/news/politica-e-potere/1292343/dalle-parole-ai-fatti-corsi-di-dialetto-nelle-scuole-elementari-di-lugano-sei-consiglieri-comunali-leghisti-presentano-una-mozione-proponiamo-l-entrata-in-vigore-con-l-anno-scolastico-2017-18.

[5]Corsi di dialetto a scuola, il Governo: "Proposta inimmaginabile." (2012, October 25). Ticinoline. https://www.tio.ch/ticino/politica/704644/corsi-di-dialetto-a-scuola-il-governo-proposta-inimmaginabile.
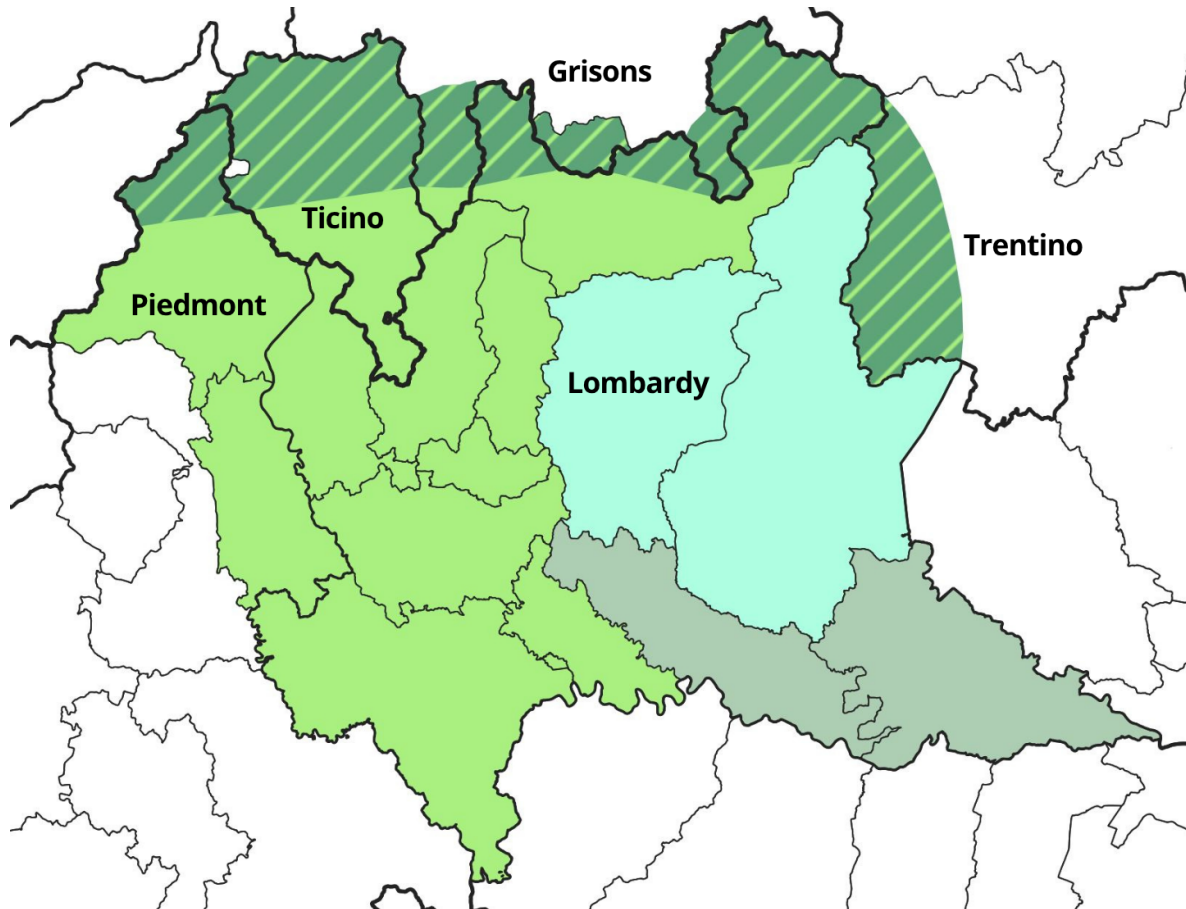
Figure 4.2: Own Map. In Light Green: Western Lombard (spoken in the provinces of Varese, Como, Lecco, Sondrio, Milan, Monza, Pavia, and Lodi in Lombardy; the provinces of Novara and Verbania in Piedmont; and parts of Canton Ticino and the Italian Grisons in Switzerland). In Cyan: Eastern Lombard (spoken in the provinces of Bergamo and Brescia in Lombardy). In Dark Green with Stripes: Alpine Lombard (spoken in parts of the province of Sondrio in Lombardy, western Trentino, and parts of Canton Ticino and the Italian Grisons). In Olive Gray: peripheral varieties (spoken in the provinces of Cremona and Mantua in Lombardy).

Chapter 5

Discussion

In the following chapter, I will present the findings from my interviews and discuss them with respect to my research question: **How do linguistic practices and perceptions surrounding the revitalization of the Lombard language reflect and produce borderland identities across the Swiss-Italian border?**

During the interviews, I collected narratives from revitalization activists, and from these stories—as outlined in Chapter 3—I extracted the main topics that were discussed in relation to borderland identities. I will now analyse these findings through the theoretical lens laid out at the beginning of the thesis and within the broader context of the borderland. Previously, in Chapter 4, I focused on the institutional production and reproduction of the Swiss-Italian border from above, both by state actors and through its contestation by regionalist movements. In this chapter, by contrast, I will highlight how borders are also constructed and reproduced from below—within the everyday practices and discourses of ordinary people. Once the border is set by the state, the inhabitants of the borderland must live with it and make sense of it while also negotiating pre-existing spatial identities that persist with the new political border. I will explore this everyday dimension through the perspectives of borderland inhabitants involved in the revitalization of the Lombard language. The focus on these specific actors is not accidental: as discussed earlier, language plays a crucial role as a practice for border construction, and specifically for Lombard, it has historically been a contested regional language—instrumentalized by regionalist parties for identity

construction. I will show how Lombard serves simultaneously to express different levels of spatial identification, at times reinforcing the border and at others contesting it.

In what follows, I will begin by giving an overview of the grassroots revitalization efforts that my interview partners engage in, before turning to the analysis of patterns of borderland identification. I will also include my personal experience as an inhabitant of the borderland myself, to further ground the analysis.

5.1   Grassroot Revitalization

In light of the endangered status of Lombard and the lack of institutional support for language planning—both highlighted in Chapter 4—and given a renewed interest in local identities in response to globalization, grassroots initiatives have become the main driving force behind the revitalization of Lombard (Coluzzi, 2008). This is happening particularly in Italy, where state policies have historically been more repressive and the decline of the language more severe. A key distinction is that in *Svizzera italiana*, cultural initiatives such as theatre productions, radio and television programs, and poetry contests are promoted by cantonal institutions. However, no cantonal organization in the region formally acknowledges Lombard as a language, consistently referring to it as a dialect. An activist from Ticino proposed creating an association dedicated to promoting and revitalizing Lombard, criticizing institutions for failing to take a more active role in preventing the language's disappearance. By contrast, in Lombardy, several groups explicitly promote and advocate for the recognition of Lombard as a language. Among the individuals I interviewed were members of the informal group *Academia Bonvesin de la Riva* and the president of the cultural association *Far Lombard.* The latter is particularly active in revitalization, organizing public conferences and hosting video discussions in Lombard via Zoom (Tamburelli, 2024).

My interviewees described a diverse range of grassroot initiatives that correspond to the three main phases of language planning: corpus, status, and acquisition. Corpus

planning involves the development of a standardized writing system (Coluzzi et al., 2018). Two orthographic proposals were highlighted: *'Scriver Lombard'* (Brasca, 2011) by *Far Lombard* and the *'Noeuva Ortografia Lombarda'* by the *Academia Bonvesin de la Riva*. Modernizing the language is also part of corpus planning (Coluzzi et al., 2018); one interviewee contributes to the Lombard Wikipedia, where neologisms are sometimes coined (Miola, 2013). Status planning aims to enhance the language's prestige by expanding its functional domains (Coluzzi et al., 2018). This encompasses most of the activities my interview partners engage in, including composing songs and poetry, producing podcasts, writing newspaper articles and children's books, dubbing films, creating content for YouTube and Wikipedia, participating in theatre groups, and coordinating a high school course on Lombard culture. A few initiatives also extend across the Swiss–Italian border, such as the *'Concorso di poesia dialettale'* and *'Ven scià. . . Cünta sü'*, two literary competitions for poetry and short stories (the former open to participants from the Sondrio province and the Italian Grisons, the latter to participants from both Canton Ticino and Lombardy), as well as the *'Festival della Canzone Dialettale Ticinese e Lombarda'*, which brings together songwriters from both regions. Acquisition planning, which seeks to increase the number of speakers through instruction, remains the most critical area (Coluzzi et al., 2018). Three interviewees currently teach local varieties in person, while one was responsible for promoting an initiative to teaching a local variant at school. Others contribute to the development of online materials aimed at helping new learners. Some activists expressed mistrust towards state institutions, as they hold them responsible for the disappearance of the language in the first place. Finally, many participants are involved in—or have created—social media communities on Facebook and Telegram, which serve not only as platforms for communication and exchange but also to coordinate further activities. Despite their limited coordination and reach, these grassroots efforts represent a significant shift in the history of Lombard (Tamburelli, 2024).

5.2 Modes of Borderland Identification

After presenting the various grassroots revitalization efforts my interview participants are involved in, I turn to the main analytical section of the discussion. I have organized my findings into three key points. The first finding is that some discourses and revitalization practices—especially among older and Swiss participants—reproduce both the Swiss–Italian border and the consequent distinct regional identities and also pre-existing internal boundaries, such as local identities. The second finding is that there is a contrasting emerging sense of cross-border belonging related to the geographical extension of the Lombard language mainly produced by Italian revitalization actors. The last point is that Lombard could also be the catalyst for an open, borderless community that is detached from strict territorial identification. An important premise is that a single participant may articulate seemingly opposing ideas within the same interview, and express multiple, overlapping levels of spatial identification simultaneously, without perceiving these as contradictory.

5.2.1 Reproduction of Borders and Territorial Identities

My first argument is that some revitalization practices and perceptions around the Lombard language serve to reproduce established territorial identities in the borderland—both the traditional local identities that pre-date the border (though sometimes intensified by it), and national and associated regional identities. This reproduction includes the Swiss–Italian border itself as well as internal boundaries within each country. This narrative is mostly expressed by older people. I argue this reflects the influence of regionalist parties on both sides of the border and longstanding popular discourses. Younger people, less influenced by these parties, tend to have a more globalized outlook and are less tied to traditional borders.

Traditional Local Identities

The most frequently cited level of spatial identity was the local one. Feelings of attachment to place were closely tied to Lombard, perceived as an intimate language rooted in the territory. Italian, by contrast, was associated with the state and sometimes regarded as foreign or imposed. Lombard was instead seen as the informal language, linked to tradition and territorial legacies predating the state.

I would like to briefly clarify the use of the term 'territory' in the following discussion. My interviewees often referred to the Lombard word *'téritòri'* or the Italian *'territorio'* when speaking about the connection between language and place. I translated this as 'territory' in English, but the correspondence is not exact. In Italian and Lombard, the term generally denotes a piece of land or a cultural–geographic area, without necessarily implying control over it. In English, however, territory often carries the connotation of land under the authority of a state. Thus, when participants spoke of Lombard being rooted in the *'téritòri'*, they meant that it is tied to the land itself rather than to state-controlled space.

Narratives of strong localism appeared in most of the interviews, often expressed through stories about family roots, local history, and emotional ties to the place of origin. One participant described how, after years of traveling, he felt the pull of home and his roots:

> *"Mì a vivi a Biasca e a sómm contént de vif a Biasca. Am senti bégn a cà a Biasca. Però quésto l'è perché ilé a gh'è i mè radìs. Am piàs visità i àltri paìs e am sómm trovò bégn, ho viagiò pèr 5 o 6 ann ho miga tocò tèra. Dòpo ho smenzò pròpi a mancàm. Ilé ho pròpi sentù che vorévi tornà."* (Aris, interview, 28.02.2025).

> "I live in Biasca and I am happy to live in Biasca. I feel good at home in Biasca. But this is because my roots are there. I like visiting other countries and I felt good there, I travelled for 5 or 6 years and did not set foot on

solid ground. Afterwards, I began to miss it. That's when I really felt that
I wanted to return."

For all participants, Lombard was transmitted within families, usually spoken by parents and grandparents, since it is not taught in school. Even young people who learned it later in life had relatives who knew the language. This reinforced a deeply personal and intimate bond. By contrast, Italian was rarely associated with similar sentiments of familiarity. Marco, for instance, emphasized that unlike Italian, Lombard felt like his language (interview, 10.02.2025). Gisi distinguished between Italian as the national language and Lombard as the "mom language"[1], the family language of affection (interview, 07.02.2025). Guido explained how using Lombard fosters closeness:

> *"[S]a ta pàrlat dialètt, la vicinànza la sa scürta. Se ta g'ha pàrlat in italiàn, ga n'è vün ca vo mantignìi la distànza."* (interview, 31.01.2025).

> "If you speak dialect, the distance becomes shorter. If you speak in Italian, it's someone who wants to keep their distance."

Giacomo even described speaking Italian with relatives as absurd:

> *"Parlare in italiano con la mia zia, l'è cùme parlà in tudésch con vun del Nìger."* (interview, 30.01.2025).

> "To speak in Italian with my aunt is like speaking in German with someone from Niger."

Many participants explicitly defined Lombard as the language of the territory. Alfredo stressed: "It is tied to the persons, to the people of the territory. It is certainly tied to the territory."[2] (interview, 16.02.2025). Gisi added that the language itself represents an emotional tie to the land: "It is the feeling in relation to the territory."[3] (inter-

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[1] *"Lingua mamma". 'Lingua madre'* literally means 'mother tongue', but swapping *'madre'* with *'mamma'* makes it sound warmer, more affectionate.

[2] *"L'è ligòu ala persóna, ala gént dèl teritòri. Sicuramént l'è ligòu al teritòri."*

[3] *"È il sentimento rapportato al territorio."*

view, 07.02.2025) and noted that Lombard can express geographical concepts absent in Italian. Others, such as Simona and Tobia, linked knowledge of the local language to environmental care: feeling connected to the territory fosters responsibility for it. Simona explained:

"[L]'è una ròba un pò anti-globàl e ho notà che pèr esémpi i giuén i én sensìbil ala anti-globalizzazión, pèr un'ecologìa pisé rispetùsa dèl ambiént locàl. Fórs chèla ròba chì la pudarà dam una man pèr redescovrì la léngua storéga dèl teritòri." (interview, 31.01.2025).

"It's something a bit anti-global and I've noticed that, for example, young people are sensitive to anti-globalization, for a more respectful ecology of the local environment. Maybe this could help us to rediscover the historical language of the territory."

Similarly, Tobia stated:

"[È]l lumbàrd, cùme anca i tradizión che ghé végna dré, té fan sentì de pusé èl teritòri. E dunca anca in una lògica ambientàla, se vorùm pensàla iscì, téngi al territòri, nò? L'è una manéra de valorizàl. E valorizàl èl vór di anca tegnìll bén ambientalmént." (interview, 10.02.2025).

"Lombard, like the traditions that are tied to it, make you feel the territory more. And so, in an environmental logic, if we want to think about it that way, you care about the territory, right? It's a way of valuing it. And to value it means also to keep it well environmentally."

Revitalization practices undertaken by participants often had a local character, further reinforcing the link between language and territory. For example, interviewees who teach Lombard usually teach their own variant in their locality: Guido teaches the Arogno dialect, Gisa the Poschiavino dialect, and Fabio Milanese. Fabio also contributes articles in Milanese to a local newspaper, while Aris writes for Biasca's carnival paper.

At the same time, I observed a widespread rejection of the overarching label 'Lombard language', particularly among Swiss participants, with a preference for emphasizing local distinctiveness through the term 'dialect'. Gisa, for instance, firmly rejected the idea of her variety belonging to a Lombard language, insisting: "We have our own Poschiavino"[4] (interview, 08.02.2025). Paolo and Guido, both from Ticino, mimicked peculiar versions that are found in Ticino, and at one point Guido jokingly told me that I did not even have to say where I was from because he could already tell[5]. I interpreted this as a form of othering: by highlighting linguistic traits that differ across localities, they implicitly drew boundaries—our way of speaking versus theirs. This indicates that each variety is understood as tied to a specific place rather than part of a fluid continuum. Altogether, the interviews revealed that the intimacy of the language and its territorial anchoring point to strong local attachments that have endured despite nation-building—consistent with the discussion in Chapter 4.

Swiss-Italian Border

Beside internal borders between localities, the Swiss–Italian border was a constant presence in the interviews, especially with older participants from Ticino. More than being expressed through national identification, this border was reflected in strong regional sentiments—a legacy, I argue, of the two regionalist parties, the Northern League and the Lega dei Ticinesi, discussed in the previous chapter. In both Ticinesi and Lombard interviews, I encountered statements that mirrored the discourses of the Leagues, illustrating how ordinary people contribute to the construction of bordering narratives advanced by these parties. Consequently, regional identification was sometimes articulated in direct opposition to national identification, but without questioning the Swiss–Italian border itself. For Ticinesi, identity was often expressed as 'because we are not Italians or Swiss Germans, we are Ticinesi', while for Lombards it was 'because we are not Italians, we are Lombards'. In both cases, the definition of a regional identity

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[4] *[N]oiàltri a ghém el nòs posciavìn".*
[5] *The variety from my valley features open 'o' and 'u' vowels, whereas in Ticino and Lombardy they are usually pronounced as 'ö' and 'ü'.*

relied less on listing internal characteristics and more on drawing boundaries against others. These formulations align with the theoretical perspective that setting boundaries is essential for the process of identity-construction as the self is defined in opposition to 'the Other' (Paasi, 2003). In Ticino, in particular, such narratives constitute a delicate balancing act: Ticinesi draw a boundary toward Swiss Germans based on cultural and linguistic differences, but they cannot define themselves solely through Italian culture in opposition to Swiss Germans, as that would imply questioning the legitimacy of the Swiss–Italian border. Consequently, Ticinesi identity relies on maintaining both boundaries—toward Swiss Germans and toward Italians. In Lombardy, by contrast, active bordering toward the rest of Italy—particularly Southern Italy—plays a more central role, as cultural markers are less visible than in Switzerland. Since Italy has only one official national language, Italian, the Swiss border is reproduced to a lesser extent in Lombardy and, in many cases, is even openly contested. I will return to this contestation in the following section.

Interviews from Ticino frequently contained negative remarks about Italians in general and Lombards in particular. Stereotypes portraying Italians as unable to govern their country and lacking basic civic sense were common. These negative attitudes toward the other side of the border may complicate efforts to promote Lombard as a shared cross-border language. Paolo, for instance, legitimized the Swiss–Italian border by invoking Napoleon and jokingly remarking that he must have had a good reason for setting it (interview, 23.01.2025)[6]. Nicholas contrasted Swiss civic sense with Italian habits, such as littering:

> *"Come anche l'immondizia no? Se i rìva a mètt in gir i tòcch dèl rüt, l'è normàl che al fò mi tal fé ti. . . No ma se al fémm miga nümm ala fa anca chèl àltro e dòpo vìvom ind ala èmme. Invéce in Itàlia a gh'è mìa chèl sénso cìvico lì."* (interview, 21.02.2025).

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[6] *"Èl pinèto èl la fài. Quaicòs èl vorà béh dìi insóma. L'ha capìi anca lü ché. . . "* "The small guy [Napoleon] did it. This must mean something. He also understood that. . . "

"It's like with garbage, right? If people start throwing pieces of trash around, then of course others will do the same... If we don't do it, then the others won't either, and afterwards we all end up living in filth. In Italy there isn't that kind of civic sense."

Paolo also claimed that Italians evade taxes: "They are used to a certain lifestyle that we don't have. For example, we pay taxes, they don't pay them."[7] (interview, 23.01.2025). Guido criticized Lombardy for wanting independence from Italy during the peak of the Northern League, pointing out the hypocrisy of opposing the central government in Rome while still relying on it:

> *"[L]ur iè tròpp "Roma-dipendenti". [...] 'Roma ladrona', va benìssim, va benìssim 'Roma ladrona' ma vàrda ché Róma l'at dà da mangiàa anca a tì. Alóra màngia mìa a Róma, in mòdo ca ta pò dìi tranquilamént' Roma ladrona'. Fin ché ta mangiàt a Roma, ma dispiàss, ma 'Roma ladrona' va mìa bégn."* (interview, 31.01.2025).

> "They are too dependent on Rome. [...] 'Rome the thief', fine, 'Rome the thief' is fine, but look, Rome gives you food as well. So don't eat from Rome, so that you can then unproblematically say 'Rome the thief.' As long as you eat from Rome, I'm sorry, but 'Rome the thief' doesn't work."

This suggests that Ticinesi perceive Lombards as Italians, even when some Lombards do not identify as such. In another instance, Guido recalled reminding an Italian that he was not from Ticino, even though he could speak a few words in the Ticinese dialect (interview, 31.01.2025)[8]. Active bordering appeared in other contexts as well, for example when Nicholas described a typical Ticinese restaurant, a *'grotto'*, insisting that Italian wines do not belong there: "I don't mean a grotto with 50 thousand types

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[7] *"L'è che lór i è abitüàa a un cèrto stìle de vita che nümm a gh'émm mìa. Pèr esémpi, nümm pàgom i impòst, lór i ài pàgan mìa."*

[8] *"[L]ü al ma diss ché 'anca mì a parli al ticinés'. E mì: 'No, ti té parla italiàn.'"* "He told me: 'I can speak Ticinese dialect too'. And I told him: 'No, you speak Italian.'"

of wine, or that has Italian wines. What kind of grotto would that be?"[9] (interview, 21.02.2025). Language practices reflected similar bordering dynamics. While the notion of a 'Lombard language' was sometimes rejected in favour of naming specific local dialects, a broader trend referred to the existence of a shared Ticinese dialect (or dialects) instead, sometimes called the "railway dialect"[10]. This label served to differentiate 'our' dialects from those of Lombardy.

Attitudes toward Swiss Germans at times showcased resentment and othering. Nicholas, for instance, resented the way Swiss Germans treated Ticino as a holiday destination while earning much higher wages in Zurich or Bern, comparing Ticino's situation to that of Southern Italy:

> *"[I] végn chi, nò? 'schöni Tessin, schöni schöni'. Palme e sóo tütt l'ann, nò? Cóme sé chì gh'è quarànta gradi cóme véss ai Canàrie. E pö quando gh'è finìi i vacànz, i tórna indré a Zurìgh o a Berna a guadagnàa èl triplo dèl salàri dé chì, nò? Pèr cùi, sé ta guàrdat nümm a sémm veramént vist un pòo cóme la Sicilia ribaltàda al contràri, nò? Difàtti anca al probléma di cass malàa i al ha creàa i Svizér todésch in Tesìn."* (interview, 21.02.2025).

> "They come here, right? 'Beautiful Ticino, beautiful, beautiful.' [He says this line in Swiss German]. Palms and sunshine all year around, right? As if here it's 40 degrees like being in the Canaries. And then, when the holidays are over, they go back to Zurich or Bern to earn triple the salary of the people here, right? So if you look at us, we're really seen a bit like a reversed Sicily, the other way around, right? In fact, even the problems with health insurance costs here were created by the German Swiss in Ticino."

Such examples illustrate how contrasts of 'us' versus 'them' structured many narratives, positioning Ticinesi in opposition to Lombards, Italians, or Swiss Germans.

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[9] *"Però mìa un gròtt ché gh'ha cinquantamìla tìpi da vin. Ché gh'ha i vin di tagliàn. Alóra ché gròtt ca l'è?"*

[10] *"Dialèt déla feróvia"* — refers to the railway through Ticino and the way it has linked and local dialects into a regional form.

At this point I would like to make a brief digression on the notion of *Svizzera italiana*. Throughout, I have compared Ticino with Lombardy, not with the Swiss Italian region as a whole. This is because *Svizzera Italiana* is not experienced as a single identity, as I have already hinted in Chapter 4. Interviewees from Ticino often initially referred only to Ticino when speaking about the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland, sometimes correcting themselves afterward to say *'Svizzera italiana'* instead. Italian Grisons were considered separate by an interviewee due to their different cantonal administration. Personally, as someone from an Italian Grisons valley, I also resist being labelled Ticinese, and many in my community share stereotypes about Ticinesi. For instance, after specifically asking my mother, she described them as unwilling to integrate with Swiss Germans while simultaneously being 'more Italian than we are'—with Italian implied negatively. This suggests the presence of another internal boundary: that between Italian Grisons and Ticino.

Many of the participants from Lombardy accepted a general national identity or at least agreed on feeling a shared sense of "Italianity"[11](Brian, interview, 17.02.2025). In some cases, this was admitted more reluctantly. In other cases, instead, especially amongst young people, belonging to Italy was expressed as less problematic by claiming that it is just "a state like any other"[12](Jacopo, interview, 20.02.2025). Interviewees from Lombardy generally held a positive view of Switzerland, admiring its political system, and in some cases even expressed a wish that Lombardy belonged to Switzerland instead of Italy. However, I interpret this as still a form of bordering, since Switzerland is seen as fundamentally different from Italy, and even contesting the border implies shifting it southward rather than eliminating it. As Giacomo puts it, referring to Napoleon: "In my opinion he's set the fence too far north."[13](interview, 30.01.2025). Some interviewees reinforced this perspective by highlighting differences between Lombardy and Southern Italy, including culinary traditions and work ethics. Two participants openly rejected

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[11] *"italianità"*

[12] *"ün Stat cóme ün àlter"*

[13] *"Per me ha tirato la ramina troppo in alto."* "Fence" from the Lombard *"ramina"*, meaning the border between Switzerland and Italy.

a national identity. Giacomo recounted how *"tagliàn"*[14] was the worst insult he could receive from his father and evoked a sense of Lombardy being oppressed by Southern Italians, who were referred to as "the Roman invader"[15](interview, 30.01.2025). Language plays a key role in this bordering process toward the South. Giacomo, for example, noted that he feels uneasy when stopped by the police in Lombardy because most officers come from the South and do not speak 'his language', whereas in Ticino they do. Similarly, Fabio remarked that one needs to turn to Swiss Italian television to hear 'our dialect' because on Italian TV you hear nothing but Neapolitan and Roman (interview, 14.02.2025)[16]. Furthermore, there is a broader acceptance of the term 'Lombard language' among Lombard interviewees, though this may be due more to the inclusion of the term 'Lombard' than to encompassing *Svizzera italiana.* Overall, revitalization initiatives successfully conducted across the border remain scarce, even though a few exist. I will elaborate on these later.

As noted at the beginning of this section, the statements presented above from Ticinesi and Lombard interviewees reflect the discourses promoted by the Lega dei Ticinesi and the Northern League, respectively. However, I would like to state that many interviewees, even when echoing some of the Leagues' discourses, were firmly opposed to their racist initiatives and did not wish to be associated with these political parties. Moreover, engagement in bordering discourses was predominantly observed among older participants, whereas younger people, as I will show in the next section, generally expressed a more open and inclusive perspective toward people outside their own region.

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[14] *"Tagliàn"* does not simply mean "Italian" — that would be *"italian"*— it has a negative connotation.

[15] *"l'invasore Romano"*

[16] *"[A] ghè la tv svizéra par sintìi al nòstar dialètt e ala tv italiàna püssée che napoletàn e romano ta séntat nò."* "There's Swiss TV to hear our dialect, on Italian TV you hear nothing but Neapolitan and Roman."

5.2.2 Emerging Cross-Border Belonging

The second point that emerged from my interviews is a sense of spatial belonging that extends across the border, following the extension of the Lombard language instead of the administrative regions. In my opinion this is a fairly recent phenomenon that however has its roots in the pre-border period, when the Duchy of Milan encompassed *Svizzera italiana*. This sense of belonging is produced by initiatives of revitalization that cross the border. It is overwhelmingly Italian interviewee that expressed this tendency, but I do not think it is surprising as antagonizing feelings towards Italians, demonstrated above, represent a barrier for identification across the border for Swiss Italians. Younger generations in Switzerland might be somewhat more open to the idea of cross-border belonging, though this remains limited.

During my interviews, I noticed that many Lombards extended the spatial identification of Lombardy to *Svizzera italiana*, or at least to Ticino. This extended Lombardy was justified through two main arguments: first, the historical anchoring in the Diocese of Milan, and second, the spread of the Lombard language. Alongside the Lombard language, it was also claimed that *Svizzera italiana* and Lombardy share the same culture. I categorize these arguments as practices of de-bordering, because the existence of the border itself is questioned and represented almost as an obstacle that separates people from the same culture. Interestingly, they were also aware that Swiss Italians would generally not agree and still perceive them as Italians.

Feelings of a cross-border identity were expressed, for example, by highlighting how *Svizzera italiana* is perceived as part of Lombardy: "The Ticino region— I say Ticino but we understand each other, right? — I mean our Swiss region"[17] (Fabio, interview, 14.02.2025). Marco referred to the physical extension of Lombardy as "there's a little piece of it also in Switzerland."[18] (interview, 10.02.2025). Simona remarked on the

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[17] *"[L]a zona ticinese, io dico ticinese – sémm capìi, no? –la zona Svizéra nostra"*
[18] *"Ghé n'è ün tochélin anca in Svizéra"*

physical proximity between Lombardy and *Svizzera italiana* (interview, 31.01.2025)[19].
The former belonging of *Svizzera italiana* to the Diocese of Milan was also used as
justification for a shared identity and culture. Brian explained:

> *"Ind i ann indré gh'éra anca i questión di Diòcesi che la Diòcesi de Lugan l'è
> anca bèla növa mé par dèl Vottcént. E dunca anca sti ròpp chi dèl vèss Svìzer
> a livèll de guvèrn ma milanés o comàsch a livèll da religión la gh'ha èl sò
> pés ind i vàri definzión dialettài, identitàri, culturài e iscì via."* (interview,
> 17.02.2025)

> "In the years back, there were also the questions of the Diocese, as the
> Diocese of Lugano is also quite new — I think from the 1800s. And so,
> these things here of being Swiss from a governmental level, but Milanese
> or Comasco at a religious level have their weight in the various dialectal,
> identity, cultural, and so on definitions."

Similarly, Simona stressed the historical unity of the region:

> *"[S]toricamént la Lombardìa l'éra pròpi una región súla, grànda, làrga. E
> anca fin a recentemént, la stòria dèla Diòcesi dé Milàn la rivàva in fin a tutt
> èl Tesìn."* (interview, 31.01.2025).

> "Historically, Lombardy was really a single region, big, wide. And even until
> recently, the Diocese of Milan reached all the way through Ticino."

Language played a central role in the definition of a common identity. Many explicitly
used the term 'Lombard language' and included the variants spoken in *Svizzera italiana*.
Tobia asserted that he feels at home as long as the language is the same, extending
this feeling to Ticino as well (interview, 10.02.2025). Marco grounded his affirmation
of a common Lombard language in practice, stating that he speaks Lombard when
entering a shop in Ticino (interview, 10.02.2025). Giacomo referred to all the variants

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[19] *"[L]a Svizéra l'è pròpi tacàda"* "Switzerland is right next to it."

spoken in Lombardy and Ticino as part of the same language: "Ours are dialects of the Lombard language."[20] (interview, 30.01.2025). There have been cross-border revitalization initiatives initiated by Lombards, such as two poetry and short story competitions and a songwriting festival. Furthermore, Simona proudly described cross-border collaborations conducted by the association *Far Lombard*, including conferences in Lombardy inviting guests from *Svizzera italiana* and dubbing films in Lombard with an actor from Ticino. She also participated in a program on Swiss Italian television where she spoke Lombard. However, many Lombards were aware that Ticinesi do not hold them in high esteem. Brian touched on the sensitive topic of cross-border workers, expressing understanding of Ticinesi's economic concerns while regretting that this hinders cross-border harmony:

> *"Péh in Tesìn ghè anca la questión lì dèi lavuradór che l'è un pò controvèrsa.*
> *L'è un pò una scepadüra in chèl che podarìssa vèss un continuum pisé bèll."*
> (interview, 17.02.2025).

> "Then in Ticino there's also that issue of the cross-border workers, which is
> a bit controversial. It's a bit of a split in what could be a nicer continuum."

In fact, Ticinesi interviewees did not share the same sense of cross-border belonging, nor were they fond of the term 'Lombard language'. As I demonstrated in Chapter 4 and in the previous section, this is rooted in the deeply entrenched Ticinese identity and the legacy of the Lega dei Ticinesi. However, one young interviewee, Aris, explicitly claimed the existence of a common Lombard language and proudly identified with Lombard culture. Other interviewees also unproblematically accepted that Swiss Italian culture is Lombard, but Aris was the most vocal, particularly regarding the Lombard language. This might suggest that younger generations in Ticino are somewhat more open toward Lombardy, although I do not wish to overgeneralize, as another young interviewee did

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[20] *"[I] nostri sono dialetti della lingua lombarda."*

not share Aris's perspective. Aris spoke about living in Switzerland while culturally belonging to Italy:

> *"[S]émm coscént de còsa èl vò dìi vèss una persóna ché vif a Biasca, cresüda a Biasca, cresüda in Tesìn, vèss dé cultùra lombàrda ma vif in Svìzzera...*
> *La cultùra l'è miga una ròba ünica, nò? Mì sómm Svìzer ma anca Italiàn a*
> *livèll culturàl."* (interview, 28.02.2025).

> "I am aware of what it means to be a person who lives in Biasca, grew up in Biasca, grew up in Ticino, is of Lombard culture but lives in Switzerland... Culture is not a single thing, right? I am Swiss but also Italian at a cultural level."

He also emphasized how speaking Lombard with people from Lombardy reveals a shared, often hidden, awareness of belonging to the same culture:

> *"Mì sa vàghi e pàrli còn vun che l'ha mài sentìt parlàa da dialètt de Biasca*
> *[...] in val Canubina, ló i pénsa miga 'quésto l'è un Tisinés'. Mì sémm*
> *cóma da quél paés ilé, a sémm d'ilé. Tanc bòtt a rívi ilé e i am dis: 'ma té*
> *sé dé chilò'. Nò, a sémm miga dé chilò, a sémm d'ilé. Però istèss, té capìss*
> *che a gh'è una cosciénza scondüda da fónd."* (interview, 28.02.2025).

> "I go and speak with someone who has never heard the Biasca dialect [...] in Val Canobina they don't think 'this is a Ticinese'. I am like from that village there, we are from there. Many times I arrive there and they say to me: 'But you're from here.' No, I am not from here, I am from there. But still, you understand that there is a hidden, deep-down awareness."

I have also spoken to some open-minded young peers from my valley and Ticino who firmly believe that *Svizzera italiana* culturally belongs to Lombardy, even if Lega dei Ticinesi supporters deny it. During my interviews, I also observed a neutral stance toward Italians, even if not overtly pro-Italian. For example, the derogatory term

'taglièn' was avoided except by one participant, and cross-border workers were not openly antagonized. In my opinion, another indication of closeness to Lombardy is the popularity of the Lombard singer Davide van de Sfroos among Swiss Italians, both older and younger generations. In my village, if I am at the local bar with my peers and one of his songs is playing, everyone knows and sings along. His songs are even chosen for karaoke among my friends, signifying broad familiarity. I interpret this as evidence of the hidden awareness of shared Lombard identity that Aris discussed. Even though the singer is Italian and speaks a different Lombard variant, everyone understands it, and it is not perceived as a different language.

These forms of de-bordering narratives from Ticinesi and Lombards also reflected a generational divide. Among Lombards, younger interviewees were more inclined to imagine a cross-border identity grounded in shared language, detached from the right-wing political projects of the Northern League. Among Ticinesi, it was instead the closed identity promoted by the Lega dei Ticinesi that was questioned. However, this tendency in Ticino was voiced primarily by one young participant, while another explicitly rejected it, suggesting that the shift remains limited. Aris specifically called out the exclusionary Ticinese identity usually associated with the Lega dei Ticinesi as counterproductive:

> *"[L]'è miga costruttìvo ma l'è cóntra. Nói a sémm pòch cóntro tutt èl rèst dèla Svizéra che èl pàrla di léngui diferént, a sémm una minorànza e ilóra picóm i pügn cóntra Berna."* (interview, 28.02.2025).

> "It's not constructive but rather against. We are a few against the rest of Switzerland that speaks different languages; we are a minority and so we raise our fists against Bern."

Other Ticinesi participants also disputed an identity that relies on closure toward outsiders (Italy and Swiss Germany). The Northern League, in contrast, was largely criticized for failing to promote the Lombard language as originally pledged. Jacopo stated:

"They did nothing, believe me, nothing at all."[21](interview, 20.02.2025), and Brian expressed skepticism regarding their linguistic competence (interview, 17.02.2025)[22]. Marco emphasized that language was just used as a political instrument for othering: "They used it as a tool to create an 'us against them' dynamic."[23](interview, 10.02.2025). Simona highlighted that because of the historical association with the League, many leftists still distrust language revitalization organizations (interview, 31.01.2025).

I argue that all these forms of deconstruction of the regionalist parties' arguments represent a new phase in borderland dynamics, where the Swiss-Italian border is renegotiated. Through Lombard language revitalization practices, a new cross-border identity appears to be re-emerging after a period of regionalism and strong bordering. Importantly, participants seem aware that identities can overlap and have no problem defining themselves, for example, as Swiss with Italian culture, or both Italian and Lombard in a cross-border sense. A broader regional identity encompassing both *Svizzera italiana* and Lombardy is not entirely new, as it existed prior to the political border between the two states. Although the tendency to conceive of a cross-border identity is more widespread in Lombardy, some young people in *Svizzera italiana* also adhere to this perspective, indicating a trend with potential for further development in the future.

5.2.3 Beyond Borders: Non-territorial Identification

My last argument is that Lombard through revitalization practices could not only be attached to territorial identification but instead become an identification marker for an open, borderless community that is tied by the passion for this specific language. This finding is supported by the following evidence. Firstly, there appears to be a higher level of spatial identification—namely European or even global—particularly among younger people, which suggests that strictly local identification may not be

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[21] *"[I] ha facc pròpi nagótt, té dísi, pròpi nagótt."*
[22] *"[A] livèll de compétenz de lingüìstiga, ghén'an sémper avüda pòca."* "In terms of linguistic competence, they have always had little."
[23] *"[L]a l'ha dovràda cóme instrümént par fàa 'noi contro loro', nün contro lur"*

necessary for engaging in Lombard revitalization. Another piece of evidence is that some interviewees encouraged non-native speakers to learn Lombard, demonstrating that the language does not have to be tied to local heritage, but can be approached as a language in its own right—a means of communication that anyone can learn, anywhere in the world. Finally, the establishment of an online Lombard-speaking community, which includes people from both sides of the border as well as those living abroad, further supports this argument.

Young participants from Italy described identifying with a supra-national level such as European, Romance/Latin, or global. For instance, Brian described feeling a sense of "Latinity"[24] as well as:

> *"[A]nca dé europeità genérica ciaramént. A gh'è minga un Stat européo che gh'è de identificàss e parlàa européo pèr vèss dèll' Euròpa. Pö però vèss européo l'è un pò un concètt... un quaivün èl disarìa metafísich. Però lè un pò gràma dìi dé mìnga vèss européo ind una quài manéra."* (interview, 17.02.2025).

> "I would also say generic Europeanness of course. There is no need for a European state where people can identify and speak European in order to be from Europe. But then, being European is a bit of a... someone would say metaphysical concept. Still, it's hard to say you're not European at least in a certain way."

Tobia described himself as "Milanese, Lombard, Italian, European, and also citizen of the world."[25] (interview, 11.02.2025). Both felt proud of their roots, but they simultaneously experience a more borderless, globalized view that seems natural and even inescapable. Brian, in fact, stressed the impossibility of not feeling European in any way in this day and age. Simona believed that younger generations do not possess a local identity as strong as previous ones because of globalization:

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[24] *"anca üna gh'hò dé dìi latinità"*
[25] *"milanés, lombàrd, italiàn, europeo e anca dal mund."*

"Dunca seguramént l'è véra che quést chì èl val un cicinìn mén pèr i gen-erazión giovanìssim. Perchè i generazión giovanìssim i én abitüàa adèss a una globalizzazión mundiàla disém." (interview, 31.01.2025).

"So it's certainly true that this matters a little less for the very youngest generations. Because the very youngest generations are now used to a kind of worldwide globalization, let's say."

Even though these young participants articulated a more borderless worldview compared to older participants, they still engaged in activities to promote Lombard, showing that interest in the future of the language is not limited to people exclusively attached to tradition and the territory.

Another aspect that young participants highlighted was how Lombard should be a language for everyone, not just for people with a Lombard heritage. Jacopo was particularly vocal about this topic:

"[L]a ròba che disén insóm ai vécc ma anca i persón pisé grand che disén: 'Ah sì, èl dialètt ta ghè da imparàll domà a cà, cònt i tò gént, i tò nòni, l'è una ròba ché té imparét nò in gir pèr la strada'. E l'è una ròba, quasi un segrét, dunca tì té sé de föra quìndi té sé minga al lombàrd, té sé minga al dialètt. E dunca in realtà l'è miga iscì, perché cùme tüt i léngu ala fin, té dovü imparài dé dopérai e tücc i pòden dopérai. Pèr mì, la ròba importànta ché vöi evidenziàa, l'è che la léngua l'è dé tücc. Dunca gh'è minga di quéi che vif in Lombardìa, di quéi che vif ind èl Tesìn. L'è de tücc. Dunca sì, l'è véra che l'è radicàda ind ün teritòri che dunca gh'ha di caratterìstich iscì. Però ala fin cóme té imparét l'inglés, come t'imparét al todésch, ala fin té podét imparàa anca al lumbàrd, nò? L'è istéss." (interview, 20.02.2025).

"[It's] the sort of thing that the old people say, but also adults who say: 'Ah yes, you can only learn dialect at home, with your people, your grandparents — it's not something you pick up in the street.' And it's almost like a secret:

if you're from outside, then you don't know Lombard, you don't know the dialect. But in reality, it's not like that, because like with any language, in the end, you have to learn to use it, and anyone can use it. For me, the important thing I want to emphasize is that the language belongs to everyone. So it's not just for those who live in Lombardy or those who live in Ticino. It's for everyone. Yes, it's true that it's rooted in a territory that has certain characteristics, but in the end, just like you learn English or you learn German, you can also learn Lombard, right? It's the same."

Tobia was also concerned about how gatekeeping by older people can hinder revitalization:

"Però una bùna quantità de vécc vorén faa al gatekeeping, nò? Cioè al dialètt l'è dumà pèr lór. E dunca sé al végn un giuvìn a parlàll té guardén un pòo ind una manéra stòrta, perché l'è una ròba lúr, nò? Però nò a gh'è chi èl pàrla, a gh'è chi èl vór parlàll còn ti. Però té ghé da cominciàa tì la conversazión. L'è nò üna ròba genüina." (interview, 11.02.2025).

"But quite a few old people want to gatekeep it, right? The dialect is only for them. And so if a young person comes and speaks it, they look at you a bit strangely, because it's their thing, right? But it's not that there's nobody who speaks it — there are people who would speak it with you. But you have to be the one to start the conversation. It's not something genuine."

Aris criticized the practice of excluding foreigners, especially migrants, from learning the language, warning that otherwise there will be no speakers left in the future:

"[L]a léngua la pò vèss esclüsìva o inclüsìva a secónd dé cóme la gént i decìd dé dovràla. E quésta l'è un'àltra questión. Sé nói am decidóm dé vèss esclüsív alora sa la parlóm péh al spécc perché restòm in trìi gatt. Sennò l'altra opzión l'è ché as devrísom, a podúm matignìi i nòstri radìs a pòdom

mantignìi una parlàda piütòst rüstiga. Però còn una devrìda méntal còi gént ché gh'am a ché vedée." (interview, 28.02.2025).

> "The language can be exclusive or inclusive depending on how people choose to use it. And that's another issue. If we decide to be exclusive, then we'll end up speaking it only to ourselves and, in the end, we'd be left with just a handful of people. Otherwise, the other option is to open up: we can still maintain our roots, we can still keep a rather rustic way of speaking, but with an open attitude toward the people we interact with."

He argued that one can be open to foreigners speaking Lombard while still caring about local roots. Therefore, Lombard can assume a less territorial and more inclusive character without losing its identity. In my interpretation, these arguments represent a form of detaching Lombard from its perceived territorial anchoring and reimagining it through a more borderless perspective.

This borderless perspective also emerges through the establishment of an online Lombard-speaking community on social media platforms such as Telegram, YouTube, and Facebook. The internet defies traditional physical borders, enabling connections between people from even the most remote locations. In this community—particularly in the Telegram group of which I am also a member—I have witnessed exchanges among people from Lombardy, *Svizzera italiana*, and abroad, all enthusiastic about the language. Many young members have decided to learn Lombard independently, and the group provides support and materials for anyone interested, regardless of their place of origin. While it is true that most current learners have some connection to the Lombard-speaking region, often through older family members, the community is still relatively new, as the Telegram group was created only in 2018. In the future, it may attract more people with no Lombard heritage at all. Alongside the cross-border identification described in the previous section, this reflects a broader trend of contesting the Swiss–Italian border and challenging traditional local attachments by fostering a borderless Lombard-speaking community.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have set out to investigate everyday bordering practices through the lens of language revitalization for Lombard in the Swiss–Italian borderland. My starting point was to challenge the widespread assumption that state borders are fixed—established once and for all by the state and thereafter taken for granted by its inhabitants. Instead, I have demonstrated that the Swiss–Italian border is not fixed or static, but continuously negotiated, contested, and reproduced in everyday life. This ongoing process is visible both in the discourses of regionalist political actors—the Northern League in Lombardy and the Lega dei Ticinesi in Ticino—and in the practices and narratives of ordinary people who inhabit the region. I found this borderland to be a particularly compelling site for inquiry because it separates communities that are linguistically and culturally close to one another. The border between Switzerland and Italy cuts across the historic region where Lombard has been spoken for centuries, where a shared cultural space overlaps a state border. I chose to focus on Lombard precisely because it is a cross-border language and holds a contested position in both national contexts. Furthermore, in recent years, discourses on Lombard revitalization have increasingly intersected with questions of the border itself, turning language practices into a means through which borderland identities are articulated and reimagined.

The central research question that guided this thesis was: **How do linguistic practices and perceptions surrounding the revitalization of the Lombard language reflect and produce borderland identities across the Swiss–Italian**

border? Building from the narratives of my interviewees, as well as adding my personal experience as a Lombard speaker from the Swiss side of the border, I sought to capture how these processes unfold in the everyday practices of those who inhabit the borderland.

Through my interviews, I identified three patterns of borderland identification that emerge from language revitalization practices. First, some practices serve to reproduce already established identities, such as regional (Lombard and Ticinese) or traditional, local ones. In this context, the Swiss-Italian border is reinforced, particularly from the perspective of Ticinesi. Predominantly, it is older generations who engage in this form of identity reproduction. However, I also observed a tendency to contest the border. A new form of cross-border identification emerges from recent revitalization efforts. This identification aligns with the claim of a shared Lombard language, rather than separate dialects, and spans the historical Duchy of Milan, which encompassed both Lombardy and Svizzera italiana. While this claim is mainly promoted by Lombards, I found that some young people in Ticino also share this perspective. Beyond cross-border identification, there are hints of a potentially borderless Lombard community that may expand in the future. The revitalization community is particularly active online—transcending geographic borders and welcoming anyone worldwide who wants to learn the language.

An interesting observation is that individuals may simultaneously engage with multiple levels of spatial identification, sometimes even contradictory ones. A participant could embrace both national and regional identities while also sharing a sense of cross-border belonging. This demonstrates that spatial identities are not mutually exclusive; boundaries between identities are not fixed in space but are instead fluid and negotiable.

Overall, my investigation suggests that Lombard language revitalization signals a new and promising chapter in the history of the borderland. Historically, before Ticino was annexed to Switzerland, the Duchy of Milan fostered a shared identity across Lombardy and *Svizzera italiana*. The drawing of political borders subsequently led to the creation

of separate national identities. These national identities, however, were contested in the 1990s by regionalist parties on both sides of the border, giving rise to new regional identities. In Ticino, this involved establishing a dual boundary between Swiss Germans and Italians, whereas in Lombardy, the boundary primarily demarcated the region from southern Italy. Today, through the revitalization of the Lombard language, a new phase of the borderland appears to be emerging. In the Lombard-speaking community regionalist discourses are being challenged, and cross-border identification is on the rise. The future of the borderland may hold a reconciliation between the two sides, fostering increased cross-border collaboration in the name of Lombard language revitalization.

My research contributes to the literature on borders by examining everyday bordering practices and showing how they actively shape borderlands. By providing concrete examples—specifically from language revitalization—I demonstrate how these practices participate in negotiating and constructing borderland identities. I acknowledge, however, that this thesis has some limitations. I conducted only 16 interviews, focusing specifically on language revitalization actors. Including a broader range of Lombard speakers, particularly those not involved in revitalization, might have revealed additional perspectives on questions of identity. Furthermore, translating transcript excerpts into English may have resulted in the loss of subtle linguistic and cultural nuances.

For future research, I recommend further exploration of language practices, particularly those involving minority languages that cross borders, as well as everyday practices more broadly through which borders are negotiated. Such investigations are valuable not only for the Swiss–Italian borderland but also for other borderland regions often considered unremarkable because they are not violently contested. This research demonstrates that even seemingly mundane borders can play a central role in complex and dynamic processes of identity construction and negotiation.

I would like to conclude by quoting lyrics from the Lombard singer Davide van de Sfroos, which capture the sense of an imposed border separating 'us':

"Varda scià. Adèss gh'è la frontiera se pò più pasáa. Ma perchè? Adèss gh'è la frontiéra tra te e me. Ma perché? Adèss gh'è un mur in mèz ai pè." (Van De Sfroos, 1995, La frontiera).

"Look here. Now there's a border, and we can't cross anymore. But why? Now there's a border between you and me. But why? Now there's a wall between us."

Who knows, maybe these lines may reflect how the inhabitants of the Swiss–Italian borderland could come to experience the border in the future—as an obstacle separating communities that share the same culture.

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Appendix A
Interview Guide

The interviews were conducted in Lombard, with a few exceptions in Italian. For each interview, I adapted the guide to the specific person and wrote it either in Lombard or in Italian myself. The version presented here is therefore not the exact guide I used in the field, but rather an overview to give an idea of the kinds of questions I asked.

Personal engagement with the language

Briefly introduce what they do in relation to the Lombard language and then ask them to explain it to me in their own words.

- What was the last event/activity you organized and how did it go?

- If someone is part of an association: can you guide me through all the events you organize?

- How did you get engaged with this organization?

- What made you want to be part of this organization?

  - If they are still active: what are your motivations to keep doing it?

- What are the achievements of the organization that you are particularly proud of?

Feelings towards the language

- If you think about Lombard, what kind of feelings come to your mind? (Example: my mom feels like coming home when speaking it—can you relate?)

- Do you think Lombard is disappearing in your village/city? What are the signs?

- Where are places where Lombard instead is more present?

- What are the reasons why it is important for you that Lombard stays alive?

- With whom do you usually speak in Lombard in your daily life?

- Have you ever written in Lombard?

    – Mention that I text with my family and friends from Soazza in Lombard

- In which situations do you usually choose to speak Italian or switch to Italian?

Revitalization

- In your opinion, which concrete steps should be taken so that Lombard would be spoken more?

- What are your thoughts about teaching Lombard at school?

    – Which version should be taught at school?

- Let's say that the tomorrow Lombard is officially recognized by Italy and Switzerland: what would change?

Language and politics

- In Lombardy the Northern League pushed the narrative of the oppressed Lombard language in the 1990s that needed to be revitalized. After 20+ years, the situation hasn't improved much. What is your take on this?

    – How do you feel about Lombard being instrumentalized for political purposes? Is it useful for the language survival?

    – Can you recall any concrete initiative they launched to promote the language?

    – Can one talk about Lombard while avoiding association with the League?

- What about Ticino: do you know whether the Lega dei Ticinesi attempted something similar?

    – Who are otherwise actors involved in preserving the language in Svizzera italiana, as far as you know?

Spatial identities

- Where do you feel home?

- What do you think you have in common with someone from Lombardy/Ticino?

- What instead distinguishes people from Lombardy from Ticino/Ticino from Lombardy?

    – Do you have personal connections with people from Lombardy/Ticino?

    – Do you often go to Lombardy/Ticino?

- Someone on the street mistakes you for a Lombard/Ticinese, what do you tell them?

- Let's say that starting from tomorrow Lombardy will be annexed to Switzerland/Ticino and the Italian Grisons will be annexed to Italy:
  - Would you have a problem with that? If so, why?
  - What reactions do you think people would have?
- If you are abroad and someone asks you where you are from, what do you answer?
  - If someone in Switzerland/Italy asks you the same question, how would your answer change?

Dialect vs. language

- What do you know about the state of Lombard on the other side of the border?
- Have you ever spoken your dialect on the other side of the border? Tell me about your experience.
- Do you usually understand people speaking their dialect from the other side of the border?
  - Can you recall instances where you had trouble understanding them?
  - What about dialect speakers on your side of the border: can you recall having difficulties understanding someone speaking a different version than yours?
  - Are there some words that I have said that you did not understand from when we started speaking?
- For people not claiming that their dialect is part of the Lombard language:
  - There are some linguists who claim that your dialect is not a dialect of Italian but a dialect of the "Lombard language" which encompasses all "dialects" spoken in Lombardy and Svizzera italiana. What are your thoughts about it?
- For people claiming Lombard is a language:
  - When did you first hear about the Lombard language and how did you feel about this term?
  - Why is it important for you that it is called a language and not a dialect?
  - If a normal person on the street (so not a linguist) claims that it is a dialect and not a language, what do you say to convince them?
  - Are there specific attempts to include the other side of the border in your revitalization initiatives?

Appendix B
Flyer

Dialett lombard de scià e de là del confin

I dialetti lombardi, parlati nel Nord Italia, principalmente in Lombardia, e nella Svizzera Italiana, stanno scomparendo. Sempre più giovani parlano esclusivamente italiano, soprattutto nelle aree urbane. In Lombardia, la situazione dei dialetti lombardi è più critica rispetto a quella della Svizzera Italiana. Per contrastare questa tendenza, in Lombardia sono stati intrapresi tentativi di rivitalizzazione. Un punto chiave è considerare i dialetti lombardi come parte della lingua lombarda, distinta dall'italiano. Al contrario, al di là del confine nella Svizzera Italiana non si registrano sforzi significativi in tal senso.

Scopo della tesi

Attraverso la mia tesi indagherò le cause di questa differenza, esplorando le dinamiche di confine tra Svizzera e Italia, con particolare attenzione alle percezioni e pratiche quotidiane delle persone.

Perché geografia politica?

1. La lingua è politica: basti pensare a come i dialetti lombardi siano stati strumentalizzati dalla Lega Nord in passato o alla distinzione contestata fra dialetto e lingua.
2. La lingua è legata al territorio: il confine tra Svizzera e Italia è fondamentale per comprendere lo sviluppo dei dialetti lombardi, così come lo sono le dinamiche regionali in Lombardia e nella Svizzera Italiana.

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Lombardo alpino
Lombardo occidentale
Lombardo orientale
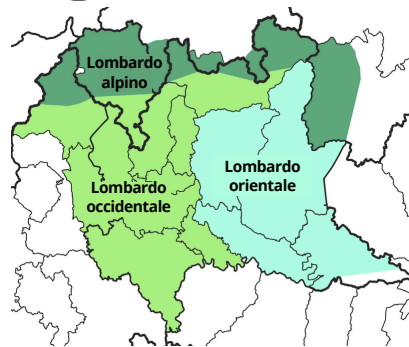
Chi sono

Sono Elisa, studentessa dell'Università di Zurigo, e sto svolgendo la mia tesi di master in geografia politica.
Vengo da Soazza, un paesino situato in una delle valli del Grigioni Italiano. Il tema dei dialetti lombardi e del loro futuro mi sta particolarmente a cuore, poiché sono cresciuta parlando uno di questi dialetti.

Ho bisogno di voi! 🔍

Per realizzare la mia tesi, ho deciso di basarmi su interviste con persone coinvolte in vari modi con i dialetti lombardi, da entrambi i lati del confine. Le interviste mi aiuteranno a capire meglio le motivazioni personali dietro l'interesse per i dialetti lombardi e come queste siano legate a questioni di identità.
Vi ringrazio di cuore in anticipo per la vostra partecipazione.

AI Statement

In the writing of this thesis, I made use of the language model ChatGPT (OpenAI) as a tool to support my writing process. Throughout the thesis, I provided ChatGPT with text I had written myself and asked it to correct grammar and syntax.

In addition, I used ChatGPT to help translate certain concepts from Italian into English. I also experimented with translating Lombard into English; however, the results were not reliable, so I did not use them directly.

All ideas, arguments, and interpretations presented in this thesis are my own.

Personal Declaration

I hereby declare that the submitted thesis is the result of my own, independent work. All external sources are explicitly acknowledged in the thesis.

E. Plozza

Elisa Plozza
Zurich, 29.08.2025