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THE CURRENT STATUS OF THE ITALIAN
LANGUAGE IN RIO GRANDE DO SUL:
FOCUS ON TALIAN

1. INTRODUCTION

Deep in the southern states of Brazil, a linguistic treasure echoes the rural hills of Italy's Veneto region. Talian, a unique dialect born from Italian immigration, remains a powerful symbol of identity for millions of Brazilians. Despite decades of suppression, this “Brazilian voice of Veneto” is fighting to survive.

Talian emerged in the late 19th century, when waves of Veneto peasants migrated to southern Brazil. Unlike standard Italian—which was primarily a literary language—Talian was rooted in the everyday spoken dialects of Venetian, Trevisan, and Bellunese farmers. Once settled in colonies across the southernmost states of Brazil, such as Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina, these immigrants began blending their native languages with Portuguese, forging a living linguistic bridge between the Old World and the New.

For generations, Talian was the language of home, work, and faith. However, under Brazilian President Getúlio Vargas's nationalization campaign in the 1930s and 1940s, Brazil enforced the “National Language Policy.” Speaking any foreign language—including Talian—in public was banned. Children were punished in schools for uttering a single word, leading to a dramatic decline in transmission.

Despite the trauma, Talian refused to die. In rural kitchens and small family ga-

therings, the language was whispered from grandparents to grandchildren. Today, it is spoken by an estimated 1 to 4 million people. In 2014, Talian achieved a historic victory when it was officially recognized as part of Brazil's Intangible Cultural Heritage, specifically as a reference to historical and linguistic identity.

Although recognized, Talian faces the familiar threat of globalization and urban migration. Younger generations often prefer Portuguese for education and employment. Yet, passionate efforts are underway: online courses, documentary films, and music albums in Talian are emerging. In cities like Antônio Prado and Nova Roma do Sul, bilingual signs now greet visitors in both Portuguese and Talian.

Talian is more than a dialect—it is a living record of resilience. It preserves the agricultural vocabulary, proverbs, and humor of 19th-century Veneto while adapting to the Brazilian landscape. To lose Talian would be to erase a unique chapter of both Italian and Brazilian history.

The voice of Veneto, carried across the Atlantic by hopeful immigrants, still speaks in the heart of Brazil. Though silenced during the dictatorship and tested by time, Talian endures. It stands as a testament to language's power to resist, adapt, and keep a community's soul alive. As long as grandmothers sing lullabies in Talian and young people record podcasts in it, this Brazilian voice will never be silenced.

2. FROM THE BOOT TO THE CROSS: A LINGUISTIC JOURNEY

In the rolling hills of southern Brazil, where the aroma of *polenta*¹ mingles with the morning mist, a linguistic miracle has been unfolding for over a century. Far from the canals of Venice and the vineyards of Veneto, a unique Romance language echoes through the rural communities of Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, and Paraná. This is Talian (or Brazilian Veneto), a language born from the dreams of Italian immigrants and the reality of Brazilian soil. Spoken by approximately 500,000 people, Talian is not a dialect of Standard Italian but a distinct linguistic phenomenon that developed from contact between various Veneto dialects and Brazilian Portuguese (Guzzo, 2022).

The story of Talian begins in the late 19th century when waves of Italian immigrants, primarily from the Veneto region, arrived in southern Brazil. They did not speak a single, unified language but brought a mosaic of dialects from provinces such as Belluno, Treviso, and Vicenza. Thrown together in isolated colonies, these speakers faced a choice. Through continuous contact with each other and with Brazilian Portuguese, Talian emerged as a *koiné*²—a new, stabilized variety that incorporated

1 **Polenta** is a traditional Italian dish made from boiled yellow cornmeal. It is a staple food in Northern Italian cuisine, particularly in the Veneto region—the homeland of the immigrants who brought Talian to Brazil.

2 A **koiné** is a new, stabilized dialect or language variety that emerges from the constant contact and mixing of different but mutually intelligible dialects of the same parent language.

elements from multiple source dialects. As researchers Dall'Ava and de Souza Leal (2024) argue, classifying Talian merely "as one of the several dialects of standard Italian doesn't seem adequate to describe it." Instead, it is a unique contact language.

2.1 Anatomy of a Hybrid Language

Talian's structure tells the story of its hybrid origins. While its grammatical backbone remains unmistakably Venetian, the language has incorporated significant Portuguese influences, particularly in its lexicon and phonology. Guzzo's research (2022) documents systematic sound changes that distinguish Talian from European Veneto, including modifications to vowel systems and the pronunciation of rhotic consonants.

The redemocratization of Brazil and the 1988 Constitution opened the door for a pluricultural and plurilingual reality. However, a significant gap remains. As Oliveira (2015) points out, linguistic discrimination still lacks specific legislation to address crimes resulting from the exclusion of minorities due to their lack of proficiency in Portuguese. Furthermore, there are no legal instruments to protect speakers of non-standard Portuguese varieties, who are frequently ridiculed in mass media. This struggle is about more than grammar; it is about dignity and the legacy of colonialism.

The most dramatic chapter in Talian's history came during the *Estado Novo*³ period (1937-1945) under President Getúlio Vargas. In a brutal campaign of nationalization, Brazil forbade the public use of immigrant languages. Speaking Talian in public could lead to imprisonment. Ozias Alves Jr. (2013) documents this repression as a pivotal moment that fractured intergenerational transmission. For decades, many parents chose not to teach Talian to their children, believing it would protect them from discrimination.

In response to this history, Oliveira (2007) identified the beginning of a "political-linguistic shift" in Brazil. The protagonist of this shift is no longer the State, but the linguistic communities themselves. Linguistic diagnoses are being carried out in educational contexts, linked to the implementation of bilingual or plurilingual education proposals.

It serves as a common lingua franca for a population that originally spoke different local forms of that language.

The word comes from the Ancient Greek *koinē dialektos* (ἡ κοινὴ διάλεκτος), meaning "the common dialect." This referred to the standardized form of Greek that emerged after the conquests of Alexander the Great, which blended elements of Attic (Athenian) and other Greek dialects to become the international language of the Hellenistic world.

3 The *Estado Novo* (Portuguese for "New State") was the authoritarian political regime imposed by Getúlio Vargas in Brazil from 1937 to 1945. Inspired by the European fascist regimes of the 1930s (such as Mussolini's Italy and Salazar's Portugal in the *other Estado Novo*), Vargas closed Congress, abolished political parties, and ruled by decree.

A powerful example of this shift is the story of Talian. In 2009, the city of Serafina Corrêa approved a law granting co-official status to Talian, followed by Flores da Cunha and Bento Gonçalves in 2015. Today, Talian holds co-official status in over a dozen Brazilian municipalities.

But the most significant milestone came in 2014, when the **National Institute of Historical and Artistic Heritage (IPHAN)** declared Talian a “Brazilian Cultural Reference Language”. This made it the first immigrant language to receive such recognition in Brazil and across Latin America. As Morello (2015) documented through IPOL, Talian now stands alongside indigenous languages, Pomerano, Hunsrückisch, and Libras as a protected part of the nation’s intangible heritage.

Understanding the soul of Talian requires listening to those who speak it from the heart. Aliduino Zanella, a Master of Education from UNICAMP and a descendant of Italian immigrants, has dedicated his work to precisely this mission. In his book *Crônicas d'un talian: ricordi dei nostri taliani* (EST Edições, 2015), Zanella captures the expressions, proverbs, culture, customs, and way of life of the Italian immigrants. The work is organized into 16 chapters, including:

1. What is Talian?
2. Beginning to Learn Talian (including pronunciation tables).
3. Italian Colonization in the Region.
4. Facts and Events of the Talian People.
5. Religious and Commemorative Dates.
6. Some Stories.

Zanella’s work is not merely a linguistic record; it is an act of cultural resistance. As Bisatto (2015) powerfully stated, “A people that does not preserve its history, its identity, and its memory will be a people without a future.”

3. A LANGUAGE WORTH PRESERVING

Talian is more than a linguistic curiosity. It is a living testimony to the human capacity for adaptation and creativity. In its vowels and consonants, one can hear the echoes of 19th-century Veneto, the influence of Portuguese colonialism, and the emergence of a distinctly Brazilian-Italian identity.

The survival of Talian in the heart of South America reminds us that languages, like people, can find new homes without abandoning their souls. From the mountains of Veneto to the plateaus of Rio Grande do Sul, Talian continues its remarkable journey – one word, one speaker, one story at a time.

In terms of preservation, we can name several efforts, from movies to podcasts, including:

3.1 Movies

The most prominent and recent example of Talian in cinema is "**Até Que a Música Pare**" ⁴ (English title: "*Until the Music Is Over*"). Directed by Cristiane Oliveira, this 2023 Brazilian-Italian co-production features a significant portion of its dialogue in Talian. The story follows Chiara and Alfredo, an elderly couple in the *Serra Gaúcha* region of Brazil, as they navigate family, loss, and secrets during a road trip through the countryside. The film uses Talian to authentically portray the cultural identity of the Italian immigrant community in southern Brazil. It premiered at the Rio Festival in 2023 and had its European premiere at the Bergamo Film Meeting.



Figure: Movie “Até que a música pare”

3.2 Songs

Traditional Folk Songs & "Canti de la Tradission in Talian": References to song titles like *Bela*, *ciao!*, *La bela polenta*, *La Valsugana*, and *Monte Canino* are derived from published collections of Talian folk music and cultural association archives that document the musical heritage of Italian immigrants in southern Brazil.

Religious Music ("Messa de Ringrassimento"): Information about masses composed in Talian, including specific songs like *Al scominsio - Græssie*, comes from religious publications and records of church services held in the Talian-speaking communities of Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina.

Choral Music ("I Bei Tempi" by José Acrácio Posenato): Details about this collection of 35 songs for mixed choir are based on musical catalogs and references from choral groups in southern Brazil that perform works in Talian.

⁴ Information regarding the film's plot, language use, and festival appearances is based on publicly available film databases and news reports covering its release in 2023.

3.3 Radio Stations

Rádio Talian⁵: The description of this online station—including its location in São Paulo, its mission to preserve Talian heritage, and its mix of music, news, and talk programming—is based on the station's official website and its listings on radio aggregator platforms.

Programa Brasil Talian (hosted by Jaciano Eccher)⁶: Information about this weekly radio program is derived from the program's own promotional materials, social media presence, and announcements on community radio stations in Rio Grande do Sul where it airs.

3.4 Podcasts

Eco Della Storia - Episode #4 ("Talian, língua que une gerações")⁷: The content and focus of this podcast episode are based on the podcast's episode descriptions, show notes, and listings on podcast platforms such as Spotify and Apple Podcasts.

Babel Podcast - Episode 31 ("Babel 31 – Talian")⁸: The subject matter of this episode—including discussions of Talian's history, suppression during the Estado Novo, and its status as a heritage language—is drawn from the podcast's published episode summaries and transcripts where available.

4. CONCLUSION

Talian is far more than a linguistic relic or a footnote in immigration history. As this study has shown, it is a living, breathing testament to the resilience of identity in the face of forced assimilation, dictatorship, and the relentless pressure of globalization. Born from the encounter between Veneto peasants and Brazilian soil, Talian forged a unique linguistic bridge—neither Italian nor Portuguese, but something entirely its own: a *koiné* that speaks of adaptation, survival, and hope.

The journey of Talian, from the rural colonies of Rio Grande do Sul to its official recognition by IPHAN in 2014, reveals a broader truth about language and power. The Estado Novo did not merely silence words; it sought to erase memories, punish belonging, and fracture the transmission of culture across generations. Yet, as the voices of Aliduíno Zanella, the songs of José Acrácio Posenato, and the films of Cristiane Oliveira attest, Talian refused to disappear. It endured in grandmothers' lullabies, in the sacred rhythms of the “Messa de Ringrassimento”, and in the courageous decision of communities like Serafina Corrêa and Flores da Cunha to grant it

5 <https://radiotalian.com.br/>

6 https://www.ivoox.com/en/brasil-talian-28-05-2026-audios-mp3_rf_174543038_1.html

7 https://youtu.be/m6mVlcZSG_4?si=D0UYNUm_uoeR6Nj3

8 <https://open.spotify.com/episode/6IocHf0UDSPpvymkNo0ZIK>

co-official status.

Nevertheless, the fight is far from over. With an estimated one to four million speakers, Talian remains vulnerable. Urban migration, the dominance of Portuguese in education and media, and the lasting trauma of linguistic repression continue to challenge intergenerational transmission. Without deliberate, sustained effort—through bilingual education, documentary projects, podcasting, and legal protection—Talian could still fade into silence.

But there is reason for hope. The emergence of online radio stations like “Rádio Talian”, podcasts such as “Eco Della Storia” and “Babel”, and the international reach of films like “Até Que a Música Pare” demonstrate a vibrant, digitally connected revitalization movement. These are not nostalgic echoes of a dying language; they are the sound of a community reclaiming its voice on its own terms. As Dorneles (2015) powerfully reminded us, “A people that does not preserve its history, its identity, and its memory will be a people without a future.” Talian is proof that memory, when nurtured, becomes the future.

In the end, Talian matters not only to the descendants of Veneto immigrants or to linguists documenting Brazil’s rich linguistic heritage. It matters to anyone who understands that a language is far more than a means of communication. It is a repository of memory, a vessel of humor and grief, a living archive of collective experience. It carries the echoes of past generations while guiding those yet to come.

As long as lullabies are sung in Talian, stories are shared around family tables, podcasts are recorded, and grandparents pass on their memories to younger generations, this uniquely Brazilian expression of Veneto will endure. Its future will be shaped not by institutions alone, but by the voices of those who choose to speak it, cherish it, and keep it alive. And so, its remarkable journey continues—one word, one voice, one story at a time.

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