

**Project title:** *ArchiWals: A digital archive to preserve the cultural and linguistic heritage of the Walser communities in Italy*

**Funding:** Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research

**Duration:** 36 months

Start date: 2017

End date: 2019

**Project summary:**

From the Middle-Ages until the last century, the Alps, a land of extreme conditions, have been both a boundary and a crossroad of cultures, languages and world views, meeting point and periphery of the large cultural areas in Europe. For centuries, Alpine settlements have been protected by a low contact regime of communications, a self-contained social and economic model and in some cases even by an explicit reference to different cultural centres compared to those of the lowlands. The consequence of recent changes is that Alpine communities are now exposed to a new cultural environment that threatens language, practices, traditions and even the very existence of traditional societies. At the same time, the recent condition of openness has made them wonderful examples of multilingualism.

This is particularly true for the **Walser communities** found in Piedmont and Aosta Valley, which go back to the spread in the late Middle-Ages of settlers coming from the high Rhône valley (the so-called Wallis, from which Wal(li)ser) and speaking a variety of Upper Alemannic largely preserved in the Swiss territories. In the last century, these communities have witnessed a dramatic process of language shift in favour of both Standard Italian language promoted by the administration and the cultural institutions and the Gallo-Italian dialectal variety largely employed in the context in which the Walser communities are immersed as linguistic islands. This has evidently brought heavy consequences on the Alemannic varieties spoken by the communities with the effect of accelerating dramatically the process of language decay, ultimately leading to the language death.

In this light, it is particularly urgent to collect and preserve this heritage because of the serious risk of losing completely its testimony within the time span of one or at most two generations of speakers. The main objective of this project is to provide a careful documentation of the Alemannic varieties spoken in the communities of **Gressoney** and **Issime** in Aosta Valley and of **Formazza** and **Rimella** in Piedmont. The documentation of cultural and linguistic interest will be collected into a digital archive which will be freely accessible online to all speakers of the communities involved into the research project with the aim of fostering the use of these endangered varieties, especially in the written mode. In this way, the project will contribute to the preservation of this cultural and linguistic heritage and identity which is also strongly threatened nowadays by processes of de-population and/or re-population by external immigrants of these communities and tends to be watered down in the unavoidable assimilation to the majority culture and language. Finally, this project aims to contribute to the development of cultural policies in line with UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage.

**Principal investigator:** prof. dr. sc. Livio Gaeta, University of Turin

**Team members:**

doc. dr. sc. Marco Angster, University of Zadar