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Varieties, Use, and Attitudes of Italian in the U.S.

The Dynamics of an Immigrant Language Through Time

Migration is among the defining features of contemporary society, with large numbers of individuals moving across the globe, in search of better lives, mainly along the East-West and South-North axes, and from rural to urban areas. Among the numerous historical destinations, the city of New York has always attracted and continues to attract large numbers of immigrants. A recent report claims that its foreign-born population numbers 2.87 million or more than one third of its residents speaking first languages other than English. Such diversity appears to be equaled only by the years of mass migration in the early decades of the 20th century, when some 40% of New Yorkers were foreign-born.¹ In addition to physical displacements, the new technologies make virtual migrations and contacts possible throughout the globe.

Outside Europe, migrations in the modern era had a significant impact particularly in the Americas and Australia, where populations are made up largely by immigrants. The focus will be here on Italian as a language of immigration in the U.S., countries with particularly pervasive migration histories. The term “migration” is used with reference to individuals displaced temporarily or permanently for economic reasons, with varying effects on the demographics, economies,

1 According to *The Newest New Yorkers. Immigrant New York in the New Millennium* written by Joseph J. Salvo and Arun Peter Lobo (New York, Department of City Planning, 2004) 2,871,032 residents or 36% of the 2000 NYC population of 8,008,278 were foreign born, accounting for 9.2% of the total foreign born U.S. population. The number includes all residents who declared to be born outside the U.S., including longtime residents with citizenship status, or temporary residents who answered the census. In the first two decades of the 20th century some 1,8 million residents or 40% of the total New York population of those years were born abroad.

and cultures of the countries of origin and destination. In the course of one century roughly 25,8 million Italians left their country between 1876 and 1976, the year when the number of return migrants began to surpass that of departures. Approximately 5,7 million people from this group chose the U.S. as their adoptive country.² Thirty years after the end of mass migration from Italy, the U.S. is now home to more than 15 million Italian Americans of all ancestries, with the largest concentrations on the East Coast, especially in New York.³ All of these paradigms hide of course a much more complex reality of migrations and human dramas, including repeat migrations and itineraries to different successive destinations.

The dynamics of Italian as an immigrant language in the U.S. through time and space will be discussed with reference to language use and attitudes, and language contact with English in contemporary Italian American communities. The discussion will be based on data drawn respectively from research conducted in the New York and San Francisco metropolitan areas since the 1980s (Haller 1993, 1998, 2001) among post-World War II immigrants and their descendants. For the period of mass migration it will be based on indirect data drawn from early 20th c. Italian American theatrical texts (Haller 2006a, 2006b). The comparative analysis aims to derive some diachronic patterns concerning language maintenance and language shift, language contact and emerging varieties.

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- 2 The figure represents the positive total, after taking into account 8 million return migrants from 1905 and 1976. About three quarters of all immigrants were males, with Southern and Northern regions accounting each for 40% of the historical migration from Italy, and with eight regions being affected most dramatically (Veneto, Campania, Sicily, Lombardy, Piedmont, Friuli, and Calabria). The mass migration to the U.S. took place between the 1890s and the 1920s, when some 3,8 million Italians arrived in the U.S. In 1913 alone there were close to 377,000 arrivals, predominantly from Sicily and Campania. A chain migration of minor proportions resumed after World War II. For a detailed account see Favero-Tassello (1978, 9-64).
 - 3 Despite its marginal nature today, Italian immigration is still ongoing: according to a census survey conducted in 2000 Italian born residents in New York City rank 11th, at a great distance from the dominant immigrant groups originating in the Dominican Republic, China, Jamaica, Guyana, Mexico, Ecuador, Haiti, Trinidad, Colombia, Russia.

1. Linguistic Behavior and Attitudes in Contemporary Italian American Communities

Patterns of Language Behavior

The linguistic repertory of older first generation Italian American adults with only little formal education (frequently up to five years of elementary school before migration) is made up by the dialect, dialectal Italian, and an Italian-based mixed variety due to contact with English. This group generally shows strong Italian language loyalty, but often lacks English proficiency, relying on off-springs as cultural and linguistic mediators, a strategy that hinges on strong family and community ties and is adopted also among more recent immigrant groups to the U.S. Better educated first generation individuals are instead bilingual or trilingual, using dialect, regional or popular Italian at home and with friends and co-regionals, English in most domains. Popular Italian, a fossilized interlanguage between dialect and Standard, serves frequently as H variety for first generation immigrants. In the second generation English becomes quickly the dominant language through peer contact and formal education, following primary socialization in non-Standard Italian. Various degrees of attrition are observed especially among second generation speakers, whose Italian is frequently made up of only few dialect-based phrases and expressions. The dominant patterns of language use in contemporary Italian American communities consist of varieties of dialect or Italian and varieties of English, depending on sociolinguistic variables such as generation, age, educational level, regional origin, gender, and migration itinerary. Attrition is evidenced by redundancy, gaps, hesitation of speech, typical features among second and third generation Italian Americans. Following are two oral texts (Haller, 1993), the first by a 48 year old woman born in Sicily who lived in the U.S. for 20 years, the second by a 20 year old man born in New York of Calabrese parents. The Italian of the first text is rich in dialect features, the second shows significant levels of attrition.

1. *“Son venuta dall’Italia nel 1966, richiamata da mi madre e mi padre che erano già ca di disc’anni. Venni dalla Sicilia ...cio tre figli, tre figli*

maschi, e siccome in Sicilia sempre la solita cosa che non c'è tanto travaglio, c'è solo pe' marito quando si trova, non potendo tirare avanti la vita, siamo emigrati a Torino..., si travagghiava, travagghiava mi marito, travagghiava io, li figli criscianu... avendo lo padre e la madre ca, facendo l'atto di richiamo, venimmo in America, cercando di migliorare la ... la cosa... Sentendo Merica una sente chissa cosa ... (...) la vita dell'Italia non è quella della Sicilia, la Sicilia perché 'un c'era travagghiu..." (138)

2. *"Italia è molto bellissima, mi sono divertito molto quando sono andato lì due anni fa; ho trovato tutte le cose belle, io cioè tanti amici lì in Italia, e ogni sera andavo fuori a ballare e poi ogni giorno andavo al mare sulla varca... e mi sono divertito molto. Tutti i genti sono molto bravi, mi trattano come ... io fossi nado lì e ... io vado in Italia quest'anno e vado a fare dove sono rimasto... vado a continuare, e tutto va bene, perché la vita è bella, facile, tutti sono calmi, uno vive di aria e di mare (...)." (175)*

A sociolinguistic study conducted in the San Francisco Piedmontese community (Haller, 1998) illustrates the domains in which the varieties in the linguistic repertory of Italian Americans are used. The questionnaire-based survey conducted among several hundred generally older and predominantly second generation respondents illustrates how the dialect is clearly a fading variety used in the family, mostly with grandparents, parents, or friends, while a fading regional or popular Italian variety is spoken slightly more than the dialect with friends, siblings, and outside the home. English is the language of communication with children, at work, and in church. The overall use of the dialect in all domains decreases from first to second and third generation (17,5% - 13% - 10%), while the use of English increases significantly (31% - 46% - 78%). When focusing on language and gender, women declared to use Italian and dialect varieties less than men in the first, dialect more in the second generation. As the principal agents of the socialization process, women appear to have a stronger metalinguistic awareness with regard to different varieties and their respective prestige. The data on language behavior found in this group of Northern Italian extraction with its strong integration into the American social fabric resemble those found among East Coast Italian Americans of predominantly Southern extraction. Here too the dialect and Anglo-

American represent the dominant varieties at home, with the dialect prevalent in emotionally charged contexts.

Numerous testimonies for past decades substantiate these patterns of language use and language attitudes. In his memoir *Mount Allegro* (1942) Jerre Mangione describes the second generation's unease with regard to any Italian used publicly by the first generation: "The difference that pained me most was that of language, probably because I was aware of it most often. Child that I was, I would feel terribly embarrassed whenever my mother called to me in Italian while I was playing on the street, with all my playmates there to listen; or when she was buying clothes for me and would wrangle in broken English with the salesmen about the price."

The few observations illustrate how individual and community language use varies greatly and how it is subject to continued dynamic transformation, with strong language shift especially in the second and later generations. The answers to the question in the U.S. census regarding a "language other than English used at home" provide some evidence of the progressive language shift in Italian American communities that took place between 1980 and 2000. Despite their limited reliability, due to self-reporting and underreporting, the lack of distinction between varieties and of information on the frequency of use, the data give some indication on evolving patterns of language use in Italian American communities. In 1980, in an Italian American population of 12,183,692, one and a half million individuals claimed to speak "Italian at home" (12%); in 1990 of 14,664,550 individuals of Italian heritage 1,308,646 (8,9%) claimed to use it; and in 2000 the figure declined to 1,008,370 (6,4%) speakers of Italian in a population of 15,723,555. If we extrapolate the figures for New York State, Italian seems much more present, with resp. 17,7%, 14,1%, and 10,7% speakers at home between 1980 and 2000.⁴ The language shift hypothesized by these data, which appears to have slowed in the most recent decade, must be read within the contexts of increasingly and more exclusively Anglophone third and fourth generations.

4 In New York State there were 499,951 individuals claiming to speak Italian at home in 1980 (total Italian American population 2,822,911), in 1990 the numbers dropped to 400,218 (total population 2,837,904), and in 2000 to 294,265 (total population 2,737,146). (*U.S. Census Data*, 2000).

Patterns of Language Attitude

Language attitudes studied in New York Italian American communities both with the matched-guise technique and through questionnaire surveys complement and sometimes contradict the findings on linguistic behavior. Among the varieties surveyed (Neapolitan and Sicilian dialect, dialectal Italian, strongly mixed English/Italian variety) English is clearly considered the most prestigious speech form. As to the Italian varieties, first generation respondents favored those that are closer to Standard Italian, while second generation speakers appeared to be less purist-oriented, although both groups rejected the mixed varieties. First generation speakers had experienced non-Standard stigmatization at great cost, more so than the bilingual second generation, a group that seems to value non-Standard varieties as languages of early childhood and as a bridge to first generation foreign born grandparents and parents. In the San Francisco study, second generation speakers similarly attach less stigma to the mixed variety, attitudes that reflect idealized identity patterns vis-à-vis the reality of speech interactions. Clearly, for the second generation the emotional heritage ties are directed to the town and language of the family's place of origin, thus Cuneo, Trapani, or Avellino, and to their respective dialects. Women appeared to be more tolerant than men with respect to non-Standard varieties, somewhat in contrast to actual language practice. Individual comments - documenting some linguistic knowledge and metalinguistic awareness - reveal a regret of the loss of the dialect and with it the loss of a heritage, even a desire of dialect acquisition. The dialect is also seen as a "lingua del cuore", as a secret first generation code, as a reflection of the immigrants' origins and of Italy's plurilingualism.

2. Italian Language Use and Attitudes of the Past through the Lens of an Immigrant Playwright

In an attempt to observe linguistic behavior and attitude patterns through time, testimony was extracted from early twentieth century written Italian American theatrical sources. When considering their

status between the written and spoken medium and their intention to entertain, the texts yield both direct and indirect data regarding language use and varieties, language attitudes, and the gradual development of new forms of language. While not representing philologically accurate sources, due to frequent hyperbolic satirical exploitation of language contact and due to a dialect attenuation that is typical in theatrical practice, the simulation of immigrant speech found in Eduardo Migliaccio's Neapolitan American *macchiette*⁵ allows for some insight in the speech of Italian immigrants during the period of mass migration.

Between Dialect, Popular Italian, and American English

As the first language of the vast majority of mostly illiterate immigrants during mass migration,⁶ the Neapolitan dialect constitutes the dominant variety in Migliaccio's texts. Dialectal or popular Italian as H varieties are used as a more 'formal' register in more elaborate speech by character types with more exposure to Standard Italian. Code-switching and code alternation appear to be associated especially with language use in younger second generation speakers, as the exchange between Nick and his girlfriend Mary in the *macchietta Cunailando* (an Italianization of Coney Island, the location of the famed amusement park) poignantly illustrates:

*Nun c'ero stato maie a Cunailando,
ll'eva sentito di da 'e paisane
'e tutte chilli scherze americane,
ca se fanno quando è il Mardi gras.
Aggio siscato 'a 'nnammurata mia...
- Se uar' iu uante Nik? - Merì dress oppo,
Te porto a Cunailando, iammo orrioppo,*

5 Eduardo Migliaccio (1882-1946) wrote and performed his skits in New York's Lower East Side immigrant theatres, and eventually across the U.S.. For a full version of cited texts see my edition *Tra Napoli e New York. Le macchiette italo-americane di Eduardo Migliaccio*. Rome, Bulzoni, 2006. Cited texts refer to this edition.

6 Italy's illiteracy rate was roughly 40% in 1911, with higher figures for regions in the South (De Mauro, 1986).

Tengo automorbo abbastio. Come nda’.
- *Mai matera no uante - Ezze natingo.*
- *Iu’ come giuste seme. S’è vestuta*
e annascosta d’ ’a mamma se n’è asciuta
*p’ ’o becco - Mi redì. Comanne Nik.*⁷

While Nick alternates between Neapolitan dialect (*aggio siscato ’a ’nna-murata mia; iammo; tengo automorbo abbastio; è asciuta*) and an Italianized variety of English (*Come nda’ ‘come on down’/Ezze natingo/Iu’ come giuste seme*), with elements of a mixed variety (*orrioppo* from ‘hurry up’), Mary is portrayed as using strongly accented ‘broken’ English more exclusively (*Se uar iu uante Nik/Mai matera no uante/Mi redì. Comanne Nik*), with some agrammatical forms introduced later in the text (*mecco stappe/mi no itte natingo ‘make him stop’/‘I eat nothing’*). What becomes apparent in this text with its dialect prevalence, its code-switching and incipient shift to English, is most of all the speakers’ participation in two different worlds.

The theatrical texts yield in addition observations concerning the immigrants’ gradually changing identities, through their exposure to the polyglossia of numerous Italian dialects encountered abroad and not always readily understood, and their contact with different ethnic groups, such as the *airisce, ciainise, germanesi, ndoccia, ebrei*. There are observations that imply Italian/English bilingualism and diglossia, language use in specific domains,⁸ women’s preference for prestige varieties: *Mia moglie, invece, la scannata ’ncanna /Mi parla quasi quasi sempre americano/ Quando io la chiamo, dice: “Guario guanne?”/Ma “Guario guanne” nun è taliano!.../ E essa mme risponne, oh “iu giachesse!”/ Giachesse? Ma “Giachesse” è pure inglese./ E dice spesso spesso “Ai brecche*

7 From *Cunailando*, 113. Simulated American English with their Italianized phonological traits alternates with the dialect: *Se uar’ iu uante Nik? Merì dress oppo* (Say what [do] you want, Nick? Mary, dress up [i.e. get dressed]/*Come nda’ - Mai matera no uante. - Ezze natingo. Iu’ come giuste seme* (Come on down. - My mother [does] not want. - It’s nothing.You come just the same); *p’ ’o becco. - Mi redì. Comanne Nik* (through the back. - I am ready. Come on, Nick).

8 From *L’italiano al 100/100*, 141: *Nella mia casa tutti tengono due lingue, taliana e mericana. Fuori si parla mericano, dentro si parla taliano.*

*iu fesse!*⁹ Other comments deplore the immigrants' pervasive lack of English and Standard Italian proficiency, while highlighting their strong loyalty to Italian and dialect, from the praise of the language of Dante and of the Neapolitan dialect to the rejection of English language shift.¹⁰ The dialect is portrayed as a language of anger and emotion that sets off code alternation: *Per le male parole specialmente, me lo ha dimostrato mia moglie l'altra sera, quando io l'ho chiamata parecchie volte "Cretina", perché non parla mai la nostra lingua. Ma lei sentiva, sentiva e poi schiattando come una bomba ha incominciato: Ma va a ffà... Stu pezzo 'e ... ma all'anema 'e chi t'è ... I' mo' te scasso 'o... Ma 'o ssaie o no, ca te faccio tanto nu... e facette na mossa cu 'e mmano - Moglie! Moglie mia! No ttocche llaico dis.*¹¹ The comments suggest language issues as a key concern during mass migration, highlighting the lack of English proficiency and an awareness of the marginalization in the new society of any Italian variety. The texts also reflect a divided language loyalty and a conflicted identity, between the realities imposed by the new environment and the dream of returning to the homeland.

3. Between Continuity and Innovation: Italian Americanisms Past and Present

Language contact between Italian and English at the lexical level similarly provides a window to the changing identities in the Italian American communities. A questionnaire survey among some 50 New York respondents of Southern Italian extraction, with one third male adult

9 From *A lingua taliana*, 147. The Italianized English phrases include: *Guario guanne* 'what do you want'; *giacchesse* 'jackass'; *ai brecche iu fesse* 'I break your face'.

10 The first generation's lack of proficiency in both English and Italian is deplored by two of Migliaccio's characters, while another laments the lack of Italian language loyalty: *sono vent'anni e cchiù ca so' arrivato [...]/ e nun m'aggiu 'mparato ancora a di mezza parola inglese* (from *A lingua taliana*, 146); *Al club ce l'ho detto: Ai figli miei ci ho fatto 'mparare il taliano... e quelli si so' messi 'allucare: E tu quando t' 'o 'mpare?* (from *L'italiano al 100/100*, 141); *Il mio compare [...]/ è un grande porco, quell'animalone! / Non parla maie, pure si lu scanne, / la lingua taliana, quel cafone! / Dice che nell'America, / per lui è un grande scorno / se parla taliano* (from *Il cafone patriota*, 92).

11 From *A lingua taliana*, 147. Cf. the syntactic calque from Italian in the construction *no ttocche llaico dis* 'don't talk like this'.

first generation speakers and two thirds mostly young female second generation Italian Americans, was aimed at identifying the use of some 80 loanwords, belonging to five main semantic fields:¹² labor and business (*carpentieri* < Engl. carpenter, *stocco* ‘stock’); urban life (*bulevardo* < Engl. boulevard; *sobue* ‘subway’, *draivare* ‘to drive’, *parcare* ‘to park’); the home (*basamento* ‘basement’); food (*aiscrima* ‘icecream’, *biffa* ‘beef’), and entertainment (*[muvin]picciu* ‘moving picture, film’, *sciò* ‘show’). While many terms transferred into the immigrant speech can be explained by the novelty of the concept which is alien to Italian or to the dialect (*basamento* ‘basement’, *avvenuta*, *blocco*), others represent markers of a new identity, partly American and partly Italian (*tichetta*, *polasciare*). Informants were asked if they commonly used the loanwords, were familiar with them without using them, or ignored them.

Overall, respondents claimed to use about one third of the loanwords, with *basamento*, *fattoria*, *bisinisce*, *carro*, *fenza*, *fornitura*, *parcare*, *tichetta*, *cecca*, *storo*, *marchetta*, *bega*, *boxa*, *blocco*, *giobba* among the most prevalent, words that were coined during mass migration and that are still used today. Another third of the words appeared to be familiar without being used, while the remaining vocabulary was not understood by respondents. A slight stratification is observed in the answers of different generations of speakers: *grosseria*, *cianise*, *ritirarsi* seem to belong more to the first, *tichetta*, *cecca*, *parcare* more to the second generation.

The outcome of the survey points to the dynamics of loss of loanwords and the creation of new ones (such as *vaccumare*), but also to their static nature, with their phonological adaptation to Italian. It is further noteworthy how some words are strongly censured, despite their being used by the first generation, and how the same words tend to become markers of Italian identity in the second generation which feels less stigma attached to their use. That these terms are strongly tied to life in Italian American communities is also seen in the fact that almost none have entered into the general use of Italian or dialects. However, their continued use today reflects perhaps a reverse stigmatization, their

12 The loanwords were drawn from a variety of oral and written sources. They include mostly nouns, as well as few verbs and adjectives. For a detailed analysis cf. Haller (2001).

function as symbols of ethnicity, not unlike that of dialects abroad and other vernaculars such as Spanglish or NYorican. (Zentella, 2005)

4. Between Dynamic and Static, Continuity and Shift: Italian as Immigrant language

The comparison of data drawn directly from contemporary speech practice and indirectly from simulated speech of the early 20th century decades yields results that point to both dynamic and static patterns.

At the level of language use, the dialect or dialectal Italian appears to be the prevalent spoken Italian variety through time. Language contact with different dialect groups promoted intra-regional cohesion, and inter-dialect communication furthered the use of popular Italian as H variety. Beginning language shift is visible during the period of mass migration in code-switching and alternation especially in the speech of young second generation Italian Americans, while language contact with English is reflected by new forms, mostly Italianized English phrases and loanwords. Language attitudes point to a conflicted identity a century ago, with strong levels of language loyalty toward Italian varieties, resulting in stigmatization and discrimination in a social climate that exerted strong pressure to conform with the dominant language. The economic and social conditions of immigrants during the period of mass migration promoted the beginning of a dynamic cultural and linguistic transformation of the Italian immigrant group, especially along the axes of generation and gender, with men being more exposed to English than women, the second generation becoming more quickly bilingual through peer contact.

Research on language use and attitudes prevalent over the last two decades suggests similar patterns, with the dialect and dialectal Italian still prevalent among first generation speakers, along with popular Italian as Italian H variety. However, unlike in the distant past, this group is more proficient in English, with attrition in their dialect based Italian variety especially among second generation speakers, and with the shift to English reaching a climax in the third and fourth generations, for whom Italian identity is no longer connected to Italian language practice. Language attitudes are shifting also, with the

highest status attributed to English, and with heavy mixtures considered the least prestigious, more so by first than by second generation speakers. Language contact with English continues to thrive through time at the lexical level, with similar processes of Italianization and similar semantic fields that reflect their static in-group nature, with loanwords that have survived for decades and clearly diverge from Italian/English language contact observed in Italy. By and large, communities have not moved toward the acquisition of Standard Italian. However, with the more positive perceptions in recent years of the dialect as a community language, the rediscovery of a lost heritage, the increased prestige of Italy in the U.S., and the popularity of Italian as the fourth most frequently studied foreign language, cultural attitudes may change also. They may result in new linguistic identities among the younger generations that are exposed to an increasingly transnational environment, and in a greater appreciation of cultural and linguistic diversity through a dynamic interaction between the local and the global.

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