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## Aiscrima e Checchi Italian-American Dialect and Development in the New Millennium

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*Aiscrima e Checchi*  
**Italian-American Dialect and  
Development in the New  
Millennium**



Honors Thesis

Elizabeth Loyacano Pedrotti

Department: English

Advisor: Jennifer E. Haan, Ph.D.

April 2017

*Aiscrima e Checchi*

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**Abstract**

The Italian-American identity is inextricably linked with language. Italian immigrants and their descendants have formed a culture in the United States with a dynamic history, particularly when it comes to language use and perceptions. This study examined multigenerational Italian Americans' perceptions of English, Italian, and the unique Italian-American dialect; it aimed to discover changes in the usage of Italian-American dialect over time. Italian Americans in the Dayton area were interviewed and presented with surveys to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. Results indicate that while overall usage and recognition of Italian-American lexical items has decreased dramatically since the 1980s, younger generations of Italian Americans today show greater interest in learning about Italian culture and language than those in previous decades.

**Dedications**

Dr. Jennifer Haan, to you I owe much gratitude for your patience and reassurance throughout my research and writing process. I cannot thank you enough.

Thank you to my parents, Leno Pedrotti and Marjorie Loyacano. I don't know where (or who) I would be without your encouragement and wisdom. Finding adequate words for this dedication was the most difficult part of my thesis.



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## Introduction

The United States has always been a country of immigrants, each adding their culture and language to the multifaceted American identity. Despite their varying countries of origin, most immigrant groups had common experiences upon arrival in the United States. They often faced (and still face) discrimination and prejudice from Americans who were sometimes only a couple generations removed from being immigrants themselves. Additionally, because of language barriers and cultural connections, immigrants often formed tight-knit communities. In big cities particularly, these enclaves enabled immigrants to live in the United States without completely assimilating into the mainstream American culture. Italian immigrants were no exception. Along with the retention and sharing of Italian culture in these communities came the opportunity to continue using Italian dialects with family members, friends, and sometimes coworkers. Many early Italian immigrants went their entire lives without learning to speak English fluently.

Language use has always been a unifying and identifying aspect of immigrant communities. However, while it brought community members together, use of immigrants' mother tongues also labeled them as outsiders. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, monolingualism was "linked to the idea of democracy, national unity, and allegiance to the country," and bilingualism of recent immigrants was ill-received (Portes & Schauffler, 1994, pp. 642). Early Italian immigrants and their children who lived in immigrant communities had to choose to continue to use their native language and face prejudice from their American neighbors or to shed this crucial linguistic aspect of their Italian identity. A middle path formed in the development of a unique Italian-American

dialect—a combination of Italian dialects and English that became a lingua franca of sorts for many Italian Americans. Through their choice of language use, Italian immigrants and their progeny were able to create their own unique identity, neither wholly Italian nor American.

Although we understand the importance of language use to the conception of Italian-American identity, we do not fully know the status of Italian Americans' language use today. This study examines changes in Italian-American language use and perceptions over time, bringing us to a clearer understanding of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century Italian-American identity. By collecting lexical data from Italian Americans in the Dayton area, this study was able to compare its results regarding Italian-American dialect usage today to studies conducted in the past. In addition, language perceptions were ascertained through open-ended interviews spanning ages and generations, which provided a comprehensive view of Italian-American identity in a country with fewer immigrant communities than previous decades. In recent years, European immigration, Italian included, has dwindled. Little Italies have lost their former status as hubs for Italian families to band together and form communities. To some extent, the Italian-American community has assimilated into the general American populace. However, family traditions remain. Recipes, holidays, stories, superstitions, and even language have been passed down through generations. Immigrants and their descendants run authentic restaurants, form Sons of Italy clubs, and take Italian language courses in school. They form their own discourse communities (Nystrand, 1982) based upon shared roots in the mother country and shared history in the United States. It is important to understand how language has manifested itself in these Italian American communities in recent years.

I never knew my dad's *nonno* and *nonna*, but I had heard plenty of stories about them. As I grew older, my interest in family history and languages led me to my first Italian class, a semester in Rome, and a week spent with my relatives still living in a small Italian town in the mountains. As I learned more about the language of my ancestors, I grew more curious about their experiences. What was it like to be an Italian coal miner in southern Illinois? What languages did my first-generation Italian-American grandfather speak with his parents? This research has not only provided answers to these questions but also given me insight to the broader experiences of Italian Americans and their relationships with the languages of their ancestors.

## Literature Review

Much of the literature regarding the development of Italian-American language and identity takes a historical perspective. Cordasco (1981) explained that before the mid-1960s, two opposing perceptions of Italian Americans were prominent; some viewed them as “a largely intractable group resisting assimilation” and others as “a rapidly assimilating group whose traits (if bothersome) were slowly being eroded as a result of interrelationships with the larger society and as a direct consequence of the beneficent ministrations of American institutions” (p. 58). These institutions, schools in particular, had a strong influence on young Italians, guiding (or as Cordasco would argue, forcing) them toward true American-hood. Cavaioli (2008) posited that Nativism and Darwinian arguments, deriding Italian, Jewish, Greek, and Slavic immigrants particularly, put pressure on them to abandon their cultural traditions and language to become accepted into the society in which they chose to build their futures (p. 216).

What led to these anti-Italian sentiments? Carnevale (2003) wrote extensively on the pivotal role of World War II in the dynamic language shifts and assimilation of Italian Americans into mainstream, even patriotic, American culture. The use of the Italian language not only connoted racial separateness in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but it also became stigmatized as a language of the “enemy.” As with German, speaking Italian was deemed suspicious because of its association with Mussolini and Fascism. Not only was there social pressure to learn English and leave Italian behind, but there were also legal concerns for many immigrants. The American government briefly considered placing Italians with non-resident status in internment camps like the Japanese (Carnevale, 2003, p. 7). 10,000 Italians living on the West Coast were relocated away from the water front, and 50,000 others in California lived under curfew for a brief period during the War (Carnevale, 2003, p. 7).

While many Italians were treated unfairly and subjected to unfounded prejudice, some did rally around Mussolini’s brand of Fascism. Pretelli (2006) explained how followers of Mussolini in Italy used cultural propaganda and linguistic ties with Italian Americans to win their favor and foster support on the American continent. Certain cultural organizations that encouraged Italian language study, such as the Dante Alighieri Society, often had close ties with the Italian government and *Il Duce* (Carnevale, 2003, p. 11). On the other hand, Carnevale (2003) argued that the use of the Italian language, in certain cases, gave Italian Americans ways to express their loyalty to their *new* country. The U.S. Office of Strategic Services recruited many Italian Americans to be covert operatives behind enemy lines, specifically because of their ability to speak Italian like natives; “within this context, Italian became a vehicle for individual Italian-Americans to



express patriotism and was thus sanctioned and supported” (Carnevale, 2003, p. 4). While individuals might have benefited from their knowledge of the Italian language, overall, World War II pressured Italian Americans to distance themselves culturally from Italy, and language was the most obvious tie to sever.

Buonanno (2011) explored Italian-American language through a rhetorical lens rather than historical. His research drew from the idea behind the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis—that language and culture are inextricably linked. Buonanno (2011) claimed that the ways Italian Americans use language can construct realities and establish identities—language itself shapes the associated culture (p. 4). Specifically, Italian Americans’ “rhetoric of identity” hinged upon the concepts of “ethnicity, nostalgia, and affirmation” (Buonanno, 2011). These concepts are expressed and shaped by language through three primary ways: 1) tropes, in which one utterance stands for something else, 2) speech acts, which refer to grammatical organization that implies more than is explicitly stated, and 3) tones, or speech patterns that mobilize an emotive response to an utterance (Buonanno, 2011, p. 5). Buonanno (2011) argued that to use words steeped in Italian history, like *malocchio*, which refers to the traditional belief in the “evil eye,” is a way of “othering” oneself.

Until recent years, this “othering” was often viewed negatively, and Italians in America feared negative responses to words and phrases that marked them as different. Today, things have changed. Buonanno (2011) explained that to use linguistic markers reminiscent of Italian American language is no longer an “element of a conflicted acculturative process” but instead a “statement of ethnic pride” (p. 8). Although the rate of Italian emigration to the United States has plummeted since its last peak in the 1970s,

the number of Americans who claim Italian heritage increased by 1,059,000 from the year 1990 to 2000 (Cavaioli, 2008, p. 223). Cavaioli (2008) argued that the promotion of multicultural programs throughout the government and society has helped create a space in which Italian Americans are comfortable expressing pride in their heritage.

Furthermore, he claimed that “Italians have entered the ‘twilight of ethnicity’ whereby they are becoming more like what was once the dominant white Anglo Saxon culture through intermarriage, education, and economic and political success” (Cavaioli, 2008, p. 225). While the decay of Italian-American stigma should be welcomed and celebrated, Gardaphé (1996) pointed out the darker side; this assimilation into American culture coincides with a growing distance from both the past and present of Italian culture.

Other scholars have examined Italian-American language from a sociolinguistic perspective. Haller’s (1981) research provided structural framework (interviews and surveys) for my study, which aimed to update his findings. Haller (1981) conducted a study among working-class Italian Americans living in Queens and Brooklyn, New York, and aimed to identify the “various registers of language used by contemporary Italian-Americans as measured against macrosociolinguistic (age, sex, class, etc.) and microsociolinguistic variables (setting, situation, interlocutor, topic, etc.)” (p. 181-182). Haller referenced an Italian-American word list compiled by Alberto Menarini in 1947, which includes predominantly loanwords (*tichetta, farma, draivare*), along with a few loanblends (*germanese, grossiere*), loanshifts, and loan translations (*caricare, guarda bene, bassa città*). Haller (1987) argued that these lexical items, along with more ubiquitous morphosyntactic features, were part of a “non-standard lingua franca which evolved naturally among speakers of different dialects” (p. 394). It is interesting to note

that Hebert Vaughan in 1926 listed many of the same Italian words and phrases but with variant spellings such as *sciovola* (Vaughan) vs. *sciabola* (Haller), meaning ‘shovel.’ Vaughan (1926) theorized that this unique creolized Italian-American dialect emerged less so from Americanization of the Italian language but from the interchange of words between various Italian dialect-speakers that formed “colonies” in the United States, with Neapolitans, Sicilians, and Calabrians interacting much more than they did in their home country at the time (Vaughan, 1926, p. 432). During the years when Italians were emigrating to the United States at high rates, many immigrant children (or immigrants’ children) were trilingual, speaking their regional dialect, Standard Italian, and English (Vaughan, 1926, p. 435). However, Haller in 1987 found that language fading and language shift occurred drastically between first and second generations of Italians in America (p. 406). Nowadays, trilingualism among Italian Americans is rare.

Several studies regarding Italian American languaculture concluded with the presentation of unanswered questions: “Is the Italian American experience today based mainly on nostalgia for our Italian grandparents or dwindling communities? Or will being Italian in America continue to be a significant factor into the future?” (Buonanno, 2011, p. 9). “Will Italian Americans merge into a new ethnic group called *European Americans*, quite distinct from the recent immigrant arrivals from the Caribbean, Latin America, and Asia? Or will they retain their predominant cultural heritage?” (Cavaioli, 2008, p. 225). “What does [the lessening familiarity with Italian American lexicon] mean for the future of an Italian-American vocabulary? Will it disappear over the next few decades, or will it grow stronger, and constitute in the end a creole, similar to that based on French in Haiti

or Louisiana?” (Haller, 1981, p. 189). The need for further investigation in this field is evident, and this study attempted to shed light on some of these questions.

As Carnevale (2003) stated, “the use of immigrant languages in the New World is an area that literary and other scholars are just beginning to mine” (p. 5). Indeed, from a linguistic standpoint, there is a considerable gap in the research since Haller’s studies of the Italian-American dialect in the 1980s. This study acts as an update to his work and draws comparisons between Haller’s results in New York City to data gathered thirty years later in Dayton, Ohio. It situates perspectives of 21<sup>st</sup>-century Italian Americans within the historical context of their ancestors’ experiences with language and cultural shift. While this study examines only a small fraction of the individual stories that make up the collective Italian-American identity, it adds a modern component to the existing body of research.

## **Research Questions**

As stated earlier, the Italian-American language identity is complex and dynamic. This study examined changes in language use and perceptions of Italian Americans over time, bringing us to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century. Specifically, this study provided answers to three questions:

1. How has the usage of Italian-American dialect lexical items changed since Menarini’s depiction in 1947?
2. Are 21st-century Italian Americans using new lexical items? If so, what are they?
3. How do language perceptions of Italian Americans today differ from earlier generations?

## **Methodology**

The research process was comprised of two main parts: surveys and interviews. The former was a more quantitative approach to address the first two research questions. The interviews provided a richer, more extensive look into modern perceptions of the Italian language and culture and allowed connection of previous research to real-life stories. By combining the two methods, a more comprehensive view was gained of the transition to today's Italian-American language and culture.

### **Participants**

In total, the survey was administered to 14 participants, each an Italian immigrant or the child, grandchild, or great-grandchild of an Italian immigrant. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 83. All spoke English fluently, but a few were multilingual or spoke Italian conversationally. All were living in the Dayton area at the time of the survey, and several were members of the Dayton branch of the Sons of Italy. Others were not involved in the greater Italian American community. Participant names in this study have been changed to respect their privacy.

### **Data Collection**

The survey began with a small demographic section (name, age, gender, place of birth, immigration year, most recent Italian ancestors' place of birth, occupation, and highest level of education completed). The main part, however, was a copy of Menarini's 1947 Italian-American word list (see Appendix). Participants were asked to mark each of the 94 words or phrases with a number indicating whether they 1) had used the word or phrase, 2) had heard the word or phrase, or 3) had never heard the word or phrase. The

survey was presented to the participants either in-person or online. For one participant, I administered the survey orally and marked his answers.

Ten of the participants had in-person interviews, and their responses were documented on paper and through audio recordings. Unfortunately, several audio files were damaged. The four that survived were detailed and extensive, and with written notes for the others, I was still able to gather enough stories and information to gain a comprehensive view of Italian-American language perceptions. The interviews were conducted in places most convenient to the participants, including coffee shops, their workplaces, and their homes. Each interview began with the same set of questions:

- a. What do you consider your mother tongue?
- b. Do you speak an Italian dialect?
- c. How often do you speak Standard Italian?
- d. How often do you speak English?
- e. What languages do you use mostly when you are:
  - thinking?
  - dreaming?
  - angry?
  - with your family?
  - with your friends?
  - at work?
- f. What languages would/did you teach or encourage your children to speak? Why?
- g. Are there any specific words, phrases, or ways of speaking certain words or sentences that you or other members of the Italian American community use?

These were semi-structured interviews, each including follow-up questions according to participants' responses to the pre-planned set. Further inquiries about their family members and their experiences with language, immigration stories, and traditions painted a clearer picture of the participants' Italian-American identities. The participants did not need much encouragement to start telling stories freely, and I learned a lot about each participant's family and background in the 30 minutes to an hour spent together.

## Analysis

After data collection through surveys and interviews, I analyzed the quantitative data according to 1) number of each type of response per word/phrase in the Menarini list, 2) number of each type of response per age group, and 3) number of each type of response per generations removed from Italy. I also compiled a list of Italian-American words and phrases mentioned by participants that were absent from Menarini's index. I then transcribed the available interviews, organized my notes, and looked for commonalities and discrepancies in the responses to interview questions. Comparing the results of the surveys and personal narratives of participants to previous research provided answers to the research questions.

## Findings

1. *How has the usage of Italian-American dialect lexical items changed since Menarini's depiction in 1947?*

Participants had varied reactions to the Italian-American Word List survey. Some expressed confidence in their knowledge of Italian-American language when presented with the survey but were surprised to find that they did not recognize most of the words on the list. One stated that he would have recognized many of the words if they were more like the Northern dialect his grandparents spoke. Others laughed as they went through the list; certain words brought up childhood memories.

First, the rates of usage and recognition of individual words were analyzed. Out of the 94 items on the list, only seven were unrecognizable to every participant (*bordare* 'board,' *mecciu* 'match,' *ollu* 'hall', *prauo* 'proud,' *pressatori* 'pressers,' *trampo* 'tramp,' and *verde corno* 'green horn.') The most used words were *carro* 'car,' used by

36% of participants, and *stunato* ‘confused, stoned’ and *bisinnisse* ‘business’ at 29% usage for each. The most heard words were *farma* ‘farm’ at 43% and *boia* ‘boy,’ *biffa* ‘beef,’ i.e. ‘penis,’ *aiscrima* ‘ice cream,’ *fattoria* ‘factory,’ and *grosseria* ‘grocery’ at 36%.

Next, I analyzed the survey results according to age category, each containing four or five participants: 1) Under 30, 2) 50-65, and 3) 65+. Fig. 1 displays the results.

Age Category	Average % Words Used	Average % Words Heard	Total Average %
<30	4.6%	15.7%	20.3%
50-65	4.8%	16%	20.8%
>65	10%	16%	26%
All age groups	6.5%	15.9%	22.4%

Fig. 1

The results for ‘Words Heard’ have similar averages for each category, while the 65+ average for ‘Words Used’ is more than twice as high as the other categories.

In a similar manner, I analyzed the results in terms of generations removed from Italy. Each group contained three participants, except for “Grandparents Born in Italy,” which had five. The results are displayed in Fig. 2.



<b>Generations Removed</b>	<b>Average % Words Used</b>	<b>Average % Words Heard</b>	<b>Total Average %</b>
Born in Italy	17%	25.2%	42.2%
Parents Born in Italy	9.6%	18.4%	28%
Grandparents Born in Italy	0.4%	9.6%	10%
Great-grandparents Born in Italy	3.5%	14.6%	18.1%

Fig. 2

One can see that the average number of Words Used and Words Heard dropped off with each generation removed from Italy, except when moving from 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Italian-Americans, where the average increased slightly. This reversal is likely due to variation in the small sample size, but otherwise could relate to recent generations' interest in returning to their ancestral, or even linguistic, roots. I will expound upon this position in the discussion section of this paper.

2. *Are 21st-century Italian Americans using new lexical items? If so, what are they?*

After working through Menarini's Italian-American Word List, participants provided any Italian-American words that they knew growing up or still use today with their families or friends. Some simply listed Standard Italian words, while others mentioned words with dialectal or American influence. A few participants chose to write down words they remembered, while others were captured in the audio recordings. When possible, participants' spellings were used to maintain authenticity. However, to be consistent with Menarini's list, I spelled the words that were provided verbally as they would be spelled in Standard Italian. Fig. 3 groups the word by the individuals who

provided them, listed by their age, generation, and whether their ancestors came from Northern or Southern Italy.

21, 2nd gen., south	22, 3rd gen., north	28, 3rd gen., south	57, 2rd. gen., north	57, 1 <sup>st</sup> gen., north	69, immigrant, south	83, 1 <sup>st</sup> gen., south
<i>buongiorno</i> 'good morning'	<i>tazzi</i> 'be quiet'	<i>chooch</i> 'ass'	<i>al ciasso</i> 'to the bathroom'	<i>dammit si</i> 'dammit yes'	<i>fromaggio</i> 'cheese'	<i>che ora es?</i> 'what time is it?'
<i>mangiare</i> 'to eat'		<i>moppeen</i> 'dish towel'	<i>auto</i> 'car'	<i>vud</i> 'would'	<i>uhem</i> 'ham'	<i>come se mongia</i> 'come and eat'
<i>ciao</i> 'hello, goodbye'		<i>kyakyerone</i> 'chatterbox'	<i>frit</i> 'cold'	<i>cis grill</i> 'grilled cheese'		
<i>arrivederci</i> 'goodbye'		<i>stunad</i> 'idiot'	<i>pantalones</i> 'pants'	<i>dommi</i> 'dummy'		
<i>buon natale</i> 'merry Christmas'		<i>stata zeet</i> 'be quiet, shut up'	<i>sal</i> 'salt'	<i>salsicch</i> 'sausage'		
		<i>vafanculo</i> 'fuck off'	<i>pepe</i> 'pepper'	<i>capish?</i> 'understand?'		
			<i>mangia</i> 'eat'	<i>maron</i> 'dammit (Madonna)'		
			<i>salat</i> 'salad'	<i>va la, va la</i> 'get lost'		
			<i>basta</i> 'enough'			
			<i>andiamo</i> 'let's go'			

Fig. 3

A few participants could not think of any Italian-American words from their lives. One simply responded that her family used “a lot of words in the kitchen, when cooking.”

These terms will be discussed in the following discussion section of this study.

3. *How do language perceptions of Italian Americans today differ from earlier generations?*

**“You’re in America—speak American!”**

The interviews strongly support the claim that the relationship of Italian immigrants and their children to the Italian language has changed greatly over generations. Sam Toselli, a 2<sup>nd</sup>-generation owner of an Italian restaurant, does not speak Italian, although his parents used it as a way of talking secretly in front of him. His parents, one from Naples, the other from Rome, grew up in an Italian-American community in Watertown, New York. Although Sam’s relatives attended an Italian church and worked in Italian restaurants and bakeries, their immersion in the culture did not extend to the Italian language. Sam explained that his grandfather who immigrated to the United States around 1900 and “spoke English perfectly” would often get upset with Italian Americans who spoke only broken English. Jim Savona, whose parents also arrived in the United States at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, spoke to each other in Italian, but to their children they spoke only in English. Jim explained, “I used to ask Pop, ‘Why didn’t you teach us Italian?’ He says, ‘You’re in America, speak American.’” This sentiment is almost a stereotype in the Italian-American community; as Paola Episcopo echoed, “A lot of Italian Americans... just said, ‘You’re in America, you have to speak American.’” Julia Leone’s great-grandmother arrived in the country when she was 16 and

pregnant with her first child, and she refused to teach her children Italian. Julia said that “[her great-grandmother] wanted nothing more than to be American.”

For children of immigrants in the 1930s and ‘40s, the distanced relationship with the Italian language remained. Ann Reres, whose parents emigrated from Bari around 1930, did not discuss specific discouragement of speaking Italian, but maintaining the language was not a priority. Her mother would speak Italian in the house, and Ann would respond back in English. Her mother learned English from her children and from reading the catechism, while her father could speak English but never learned to read it. Ann has been involved with the Sons of Italy for 30 years, but she, her three children, and four grandchildren never learned to speak the Italian language.

Geno Pellegrini’s grandparents arrived in the United States around 1920 to find work. They spoke Nones with Geno’s father and his siblings when they were young children, but both learned to speak and read English fluently. Geno described the changing perceptions of Italian and Nones from his father’s generation to his own:

We thought [speaking Nones and Italian] was cool in our generation. In Dad’s, they were a little embarrassed about Nones, but the next generation, we thought it was cool, and Dad did too by then. But my impression is as little kids, they were trying to be American. But by our generation, it was the other way around—we were trying to be Italian.

Although Geno’s father and his siblings did not try to hide their Italian heritage as children, they went out of their way to assimilate into American culture: “They were born in America—they were Americans.”

A common narrative throughout the interviews was the Americanization of Italian names. Jim Savona's full name is Giacomo Vincenzo Michele Savona, but he goes by Jim. Geno Pellegrini was named after his father, whose name was originally spelled 'Gino.' However, his family tells the story that young Gino's first grade teacher told him his name was spelled incorrectly—Geno would be more appropriate. From that point on, Gino was Geno. Cordasco (1981) discussed the role the American school system played in the assimilation of Italian Americans. He cited educational historian Cubberley from 1906 who declared, "Our task is to *break up* [immigrants'] groups and settlements, to assimilate or amalgamate these people as a part of the American race, and to implant in their children, so far as can be done, the Anglo-Saxon conception of righteousness..." (p. 59). Although a one-letter difference in a first-grader's name seems miniscule, it represents the larger agenda behind some educators to Americanize immigrant children. Julia Leone also spoke of generational differences in naming practices of Italian Americans. Her mother, a third-generation Italian American, was named Mary Lou, and her siblings were Elizabeth and John—all very Anglican names. However, John's parents were appalled at the names he chose for his children—Dominic, Angelo, and Giovanni. Julia's grandparents' name choices reflected their effort to assimilate into American culture, while her uncle chose to honor his heritage by choosing traditional Italian names for his children. Carnevale (2003) also gave examples of this phenomenon: Pauline Miceli became Pauline Mitchell; Francesco Carnovale began signing as Frank Campbell.

It is interesting that the pressure to assimilate came from both inside and outside the Italian-American community. Carnevale (2003) noted that Leonard Covello, Italian-American educator, used his radio program in the 1940s to urge Italian immigrants to

learn English and take citizenship classes (p. 19). Why did so many Italian Americans, like Covello and the relatives of the interviewees in this study, strive toward the English language? Often, being Italian and speaking the Italian language was cause for discrimination and stereotyping, or as mentioned earlier, fear. Carnevale (2003) cited a columnist for *Colliers* in 1940: “You would think from some of the talk in circulation that our Italians were getting ready to carve up our government and hand it to Mussolini on a spaghetti-with-meatballs platter” (p. 8). Geno Pellegrini explained that even though his grandparents lived in a coal-mining town with plenty of immigrant groups represented, “they were discriminated against as Italians... like ‘dumb Italians’ kind of remarks.” Geno’s grandparents even feared the Ku Klux Klan, or as they called it, “the Cu Cu Clan.” Julia also mentioned that her grandparents worried about their Italian-named grandchildren: “They were afraid that [Dominic, Angelo, and Giovanni] would be stereotypes—prejudiced against—because that’s what they experienced when they came here.”

### **“You can’t forget where you came from”**

By the time the post-World War II wave of Italians began emigrating to the United States, language perceptions were beginning to change. I spoke with two women, Paola Episcopo and Simona Nardo, whose family migration stories were strikingly similar. Both had parents who left Italy to escape the postwar economic and political turmoil. Both had parents who encouraged their children to learn and speak Italian. Simona spoke of her immigrant cousin who refused to speak Italian with his kids, but clarified, “My parents never thought that it was a status symbol to only speak English. They were never ashamed to speak Italian. Because they came here in ’56, so kind of

later—things were changing then.” Paola immigrated to the United States with her parents when she was seven years old, and any trace of an Italian accent is undetectable. However, she is “blessed” speak it fluently, thanks to her upbringing and interest. She explained, “My father—he was educated enough—he said, ‘You will learn English because you’re in this environment, but you have to also learn Italian... You can’t forget where you came from.’”

Simona went on to get both her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in Italian, and Paola became a French and Spanish teacher. Both spoke a mix of Standard Italian and English with their children as they raised them. When asked if she taught or encouraged her children to speak Italian, Simona responded, “It just happened. I don’t even know that I realized they understood Italian the way they did. It’s great they can totally understand another language without any effort.” Simona’s Italian mother helped raise her two children, who now both understand Italian “100 percent,” and the oldest studied the language in college. Paola’s children learned Italian and English simultaneously growing up, but when they started school, it eventually became English. Now they understand Italian well, but do not speak it fluently, although her daughter took Italian classes in college. Paola tries to speak Italian to her grandchildren because “it’s something [she] would like to keep alive. But it’s more difficult as the generations trickle down.”

Julia Leone (age 28) is a younger Italian American who also wants to keep the language “alive.” She speaks Italian conversationally, as she picked up words and phrases from her family growing up and learned “proper Italian” in high school. While she is four generations removed, all eight of her great-grandparents were from Italy, and they all settled in the same area: Youngstown, Ohio. The Italian community is still strong in the

area, with Italian being the most popular language course offered in the high schools—a rare occurrence today. “I had no idea that people’s last names ended in anything other than a vowel growing up,” Julia joked. While she grew up in an English-speaking household (with a few Italian-American words and phrases thrown in the mix), Julia said that she would “push” for her future children to learn Italian: “They’ll learn the same words probably more so than I did because I speak it more, so growing up, they’re gonna hear more things in Italian or reprimands in Italian so no one knows what I’m saying to them in public.”

Julia and Paola also discussed the growing benefits of learning a foreign language in society today. Julia described the “push our generation is kind of moving back towards” to foreign language learning, both as a celebration of heritage and for professional reasons. Paola, who speaks English, Italian, French, and Spanish explained that her multilingualism is viewed as an asset rather than a stigma: “I had a job everywhere; I never lacked for a job. Within weeks, wherever we went...” Additionally, she cited globalization as a factor contributing to this push for language learning: “There is a real interest now because you realize how small the world is.”

## **Discussion**

The interviews and survey responses proved informative and valuable. This discussion first compares this study’s results to Haller’s 1981 study of Italian-American dialect. Next, it examines some patterns in the types of Italian-American words and phrases that participants remembered. Following are suggestions for future research and implications for the state of Italian-American language identity going forward.



### Italian American Lexicon: 1981 to 2016

There would be a more accurate comparison if this study had taken place in Queens and Brooklyn like Haller's (1981), but nevertheless it is useful to look for patterns and variations in the results. Concerning the results according to age group, the trend was the same in this study and Haller's (1981): Italian-American lexicon use increased the older the age category. However, the overall use and recognition of the items on Menarini's 1947 list have decreased dramatically since 1981. The participants in Haller's study, on average had used 42.6% and heard 28.2% of the lexical items, while this study's participants had on average used only 6.5% and heard 15.9%. This is unsurprising, considering that word use and recognition in this study also decreased dramatically per the number of generations removed from Italy, and Italian immigration to the United States has diminished greatly in recent decades.

Haller (1981) also mentioned that several participants indicated knowledge of varying forms of certain words on Menarini's list based on their familiarity with specific Italian regional dialects (*spelliari* for *spellare*, *fornice* for *fornitura*, *elevaita* for *elevatore*, etc.) (p. 189). Many of the participants in this study did the same. Paola Episcopo mentioned that her family said *uhem* instead of *emma* for ham, and that many of the words she recognized only from other families. Her parents only spoke Standard Italian once they arrived in the United States, and many of the words on Menarini's list have origins in Southern dialects. Likewise, Simona Nardo clarified that most of the words on the list she knew not from her own family, but from Southern Italian friends and acquaintances. Simona's mother was from Northern Italy and cut the vowels off the end of many variants: *pichinicch* for *pichinicche*, *aiscrim* for *aiscrima*, and *sanemagun*

for *sanemagogna*. Geno Pellegrini, who lived with his grandparents from Northern Italy for several years as a teenager, recognized only three of the words on Menarini's list but stated that he would have recognized more than a dozen if they had been similar to the Nones dialect.

Many participants remembered some Italian-American words and phrases that were not included in Menarini's 1947 list. Notable patterns emerged. Six out of the seven participants that provided words of their own mentioned kitchen or food words, such as *moppeen* 'dish towel,' *mangia* 'eat' or *fromaggio* 'cheese.' Many Italian traditions are centered around food. Ann Reres mentioned that her parents had many Italian friends, and they would get together for holidays or to bake traditional Italian *dolciumi*. Sam Toselli said his Italian-American experience was "always connected with food." He worked for Marian's when he was younger, and now he owns a restaurant. "Cooking," he said, "was an avocation, not just a vocation."

Four participants mentioned admonitions (*basta!* 'enough!' and *stata zeet/tazzi!* 'be quiet!'), swear words (*maron* 'dammit (Madonna)' and *vafanculo* 'fuck off'), or insults (*stunad* 'idiot' and *dommi* 'dummy'). This pattern correlates with the tendency of several participants to use Italian when angry more so than in other situations. Paola talked about how her teenage children would know she was upset when she started speaking Italian to them. Julia also mentioned that she and her brothers picked up on swear words from her family, as her older relatives would speak in Italian when they did not want the children to know what they were saying. This use of Italian by older generations as almost a secret code was a frequent occurrence, at least according to the participants in this study. These similarities in memorable lexicon demonstrate again that

shared experiences run through individual histories of Italian Americans, connecting them together as a group even in the present day. The evolving history of language perceptions and use is another important discussion point.

### **Moving Forward**

The future of the Italian-American identity remains unclear, but one can speculate. The results of the survey in this study indicate that the Italian-American dialect that Haller wrote about in 1981 is moving toward extinction as Italian Americans relocate out of the tight-knit communities and merge linguistically with speakers of Standard American English. However, it appears that the interest in learning Standard Italian might be on the rise in more recent generations. The stigma associated with speaking Italian is gone, individual regional dialects are used less and less even in Italy, and Italian heritage has become associated with delicious food and big families—a source of cultural pride.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for many other immigrant groups today. Immigrants who speak both Spanish and English sometimes face disdain and pressure to assimilate, particularly in states bordering Mexico. Furthermore, Islamophobia is on the rise in the United States, and speaking Arabic in public can invite unwanted attention. The problems these groups are facing today mirror issues Italian immigrants dealt with in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Italian Americans were distrusted during World War II because of the groups' perceived association with Mussolini, much like the ignorant homogenization of Latinos as lazy illegals and Muslims as terrorists. In addition to providing a better understanding of Italian-American language identity today, this study demonstrates how prejudice against immigrant languages has always weighed heavily in American history.

It serves as a reminder to be sensitive to the struggles with identity and language that immigrant groups face in the present day.

Looking forward, this study would be useful to replicate on a larger scale, both by increasing the number of participants and widening the geographic location of the study. Additionally, this study could be improved by incorporating more elements of Haller's (1981) study, such as accounting for any common morphosyntactic features that the speakers displayed during their interviews; these could be elicited by asking those who are capable to speak in their Italian dialect or Standard Italian. Haller (1981) also references a "linguistic atlas of Italian-American dialects, which is in its preliminary phase now" (p. 182). However, it appears that a large-scale Italian-American dictionary has not yet been compiled, and perhaps this singular dialect is too scattered now to form a linguistic atlas. It is possible though, with several thorough regional studies structured similarly to this one (and Haller's in 1981), that this long-term project idea could come to fruition.

Although the Italian-American identity is becoming, in many ways, more closely linked to the general group of white European Americans, the unique heritage and traditions remain important to many descendants of Italian immigrants. Cordasco (1981) cited Marcus Hansen's (1892-1938) "law of third generation return" which explained how "a spontaneous and almost irresistible impulse drove [the third generation after immigration] to the study of their heritage" (p. 60). Today, this concept could be applied to fourth and fifth generations as well. Additionally, with the current poor financial state of Italy, it is possible that a new wave of Italian migrants will begin to request entry to the United States (whether they will be accepted is another matter). In any case, there are

countless untold stories and unmined aspects of Italian-American language that, if studied and documented, would help to create a clearer picture of what it means to identify and use language as an Italian American in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century.

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## Appendix

For each word or phrase, please indicate with the corresponding number if you: 1) have used the word or phrase, 2) have heard the word or phrase, or 3) have never heard the word or phrase.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| ___ <i>aiscrima</i> ‘ice cream’               | ___ <i>corni</i> ‘corn’                         |
| ___ <i>ausa</i> ‘house’                       | ___ <i>cottu</i> ‘coat’                         |
| ___ <i>avenuta</i> ‘avenue’                   | ___ <i>cuntri</i> ‘country’                     |
| ___ <i>baccause</i> ‘bathroom’                | ___ <i>dei</i> ‘day’                            |
| ___ <i>baritenne</i> ‘bartender’              | ___ <i>dora</i> ‘door’                          |
| ___ <i>bassa città</i> ‘downtown’             | ___ <i>draivare</i> ‘drive’                     |
| ___ <i>bega</i> ‘bag’                         | ___ <i>elevatore</i> ‘elevator’                 |
| ___ <i>biffa</i> ‘beef,’ i.e. ‘penis’         | ___ <i>emma</i> ‘ham’                           |
| ___ <i>bisininse</i> ‘business’               | ___ <i>essi</i> ‘ass’                           |
| ___ <i>blocco</i> ‘block’                     | ___ <i>farma</i> ‘farm’                         |
| ___ <i>bluffare</i> ‘bluff’                   | ___ <i>fattoria</i> ‘factory’                   |
| ___ <i>boia</i> ‘boy’                         | ___ <i>frunti</i> ‘front’                       |
| ___ <i>bordare</i> ‘board’                    | ___ <i>fruttistendo</i> ‘fruit stand’           |
| ___ <i>bosso</i> ‘boss’                       | ___ <i>futte</i> ‘foot’                         |
| ___ <i>boxa</i> ‘box’                         | ___ <i>genituri</i> ‘janitor’                   |
| ___ <i>breddi</i> ‘bread’                     | ___ <i>ghella</i> ‘girl’                        |
| ___ <i>ho brocco una lega</i> ‘I broke a leg’ | ___ <i>ghenga</i> ‘gang’                        |
| ___ <i>bruma</i> ‘broom’                      | ___ <i>germanese</i> ‘German’                   |
| ___ <i>bucco</i> ‘book’                       | ___ <i>giobba</i> ‘job’                         |
| ___ <i>caricare</i> ‘charge’                  | ___ <i>giumpare</i> ‘jump’                      |
| ___ <i>carro</i> ‘car’                        | ___ <i>grini</i> ‘green’                        |
| ___ <i>cecca</i> ‘check’                      | ___ <i>grosseria</i> ‘grocery’                  |
| ___ <i>cera</i> ‘chair’                       | ___ <i>grossiere</i> ‘grocer’                   |
| ___ <i>checchi</i> ‘cake’                     | ___ <i>guarda bene</i> ‘he/she is good-looking’ |
| ___ <i>cisi</i> ‘cheese’                      | ___ <i>gunnaiti</i> ‘good night’                |
| ___ <i>coll</i> ‘cold’                        |   |

___ <i>iarda</i> ‘yard’	___ <i>rena</i> ‘rain’
___ <i>introdurre</i> ‘introduce’	___ <i>rennita</i> ‘rent’
___ <i>lega</i> ‘leg’	___ <i>rummu</i> ‘room’
___ <i>lova</i> ‘lover’	___ <i>sanemagogna</i> ‘son of a gun’
___ <i>marchetta</i> ‘market’	___ <i>sciabola</i> ‘shovel’
___ <i>mecciu</i> ‘match’	___ <i>scichenze</i> ‘shake hands’
___ <i>munu</i> ‘moon’	___ <i>sciussi</i> ‘shoes’
___ <i>ollu</i> ‘hall’	___ <i>secche</i> ‘sick’
___ <i>orsi</i> ‘horse’	___ <i>smollu</i> ‘small’
___ <i>otello</i> ‘hotel’	___ <i>spellare</i> ‘spell’
___ <i>parcare</i> ‘park’	___ <i>stoppare</i> ‘stop’
___ <i>penzi</i> ‘pants’	___ <i>storo</i> ‘store’
___ <i>pezzi</i> ‘dollars, money’	___ <i>stunato</i> ‘confused, stoned’
___ <i>piccare</i> ‘pick’	___ <i>tichetta</i> ‘ticket’
___ <i>picchinarie</i> ‘picnic’	___ <i>ticcia</i> ‘teacher’
___ <i>picciu</i> ‘picture’	___ <i>trampo</i> ‘tramp’
___ <i>pittare</i> ‘paint’	___ <i>trobolo</i> ‘trouble’
___ <i>pizzapaia</i> ‘pizza pie’	___ <i>uindi</i> ‘windy’
___ <i>polasciare</i> ‘polish’	___ <i>vazzumara</i> ‘what’s the matter’
___ <i>prauo</i> ‘proud’	___ <i>verde corno</i> ‘green horn’
___ <i>pressatori</i> ‘pressers’	___ <i>vuora</i> ‘water’
___ <i>pussi</i> ‘cat’	