



LANGUAGE LESSON

Coming to America. Most Italian immigrants could not read, write or speak standard Italian. [Painting by Robert Cimbalò]

BY MARY ANN CASTRONOVO FUSCO

“With a last name like yours, how come you don’t speak Italian?” How many Italian Americans have been asked this question? Some feel ashamed of their inability to speak the language of their ancestors. Others are unsure how to respond. But now historian Nancy C. Carnevale, who teaches at New Jersey’s Montclair State University, offers some insightful answers in her book, *A New Language, A New World: Italian Immigrants in the United States, 1890-1945*.

PARLA ITALIANO?

Today, the “standard” Italian spoken in Italy is based on a medieval Tuscan dialect used by Dante, Petrarca and Boccaccio. For centuries, educated Italians could understand this “literary” language, but the vast majority spoke only their regional dialects.

Why? Because after the fall of Rome in the 5th century A.D., Italy was divided among many foreign powers and was only “a geographical expression,” as the 19th century German statesman Klemens von Metternich famously observed.

Finally, in 1860, Italy drove out the foreigners and became a unified nation again, but it was a country without a common language understood by most of its citizens. “The number of and distinctiveness of the dialects spoken throughout Italy made it difficult and sometimes impossible for people from different areas to communicate,” Carnevale writes.

The new Italian government turned to Italy’s greatest poets to create a common language that would be taught in schools and be the “official” language of Italy. However, this new national language was not yet widely

spoken by the turn of the 20th century when millions of Italians, mainly from the south, immigrated to the United States.

ITAL-ENGLISH

Upon their arrival on these shores, Italian immigrants tended to cluster in communities composed of people from their own regions, which allowed them to communicate in their native dialects. In cases where there was no common language, “Italians resorted to a hybrid language: a creole that combined elements of English, dialect—primarily Neapolitan—and Italian,” explains Carnevale.

Thus, *carro* was used for “car,” *marchetta* for “market,” *boia* for “boy,” *azzorrait* for “that’s all right.” “Consider, for example, the expression *andarre a flabussce* that literally translates to ‘go to Flatbush’ in



Italian immigrants graduate from an English class circa 1915.

Brooklyn (*Broccolino*), but was used as a euphemism for dying because Flatbush was home to a large Italian cemetery,” she adds. A few decades later, the Italian American expressions popularized in the music of singers like Louis Prima and Rosemary Clooney during the 1940s added another layer to the linguistic mix. As spoken on this side of the Atlantic, Italian would be unintelligible to someone in Rome or Milan.

LOSING THE LANGUAGE

Many immigrant families were reluctant to teach their children their dialect for fear of appearing backward or low class. They also knew instinctively that to get ahead in America, their children had to speak English well. As a result, many Italian families were bilingual with the parents speaking their dialect and the children understanding, but responding in English.

The children of these immigrants could not learn Italian at school either. During the first decades of the 20th century, American public schools were intent on turning the children of Italian immigrants into Americans. As

a result, “neither Italy nor anything Italian (except for Columbus) was ever mentioned, resulting in a sense of inferiority,” writes Carnevale. Those with a facility for foreign languages studied French, German or Spanish, because “it was fashionable to forget Italian.” Finally, in 1922, it was decreed that Italian had to be offered “in any school that had 60 or more students who wanted to study it.”

This achievement was largely due to the efforts of **Leonard Covello**, a gifted teacher and high school principal, who started one of the first Italian classes in an American public school at New York City’s DeWitt Clinton High School. Covello realized that by denying children the chance to learn Italian, schools were making them ashamed of their heritage and alienating them from their families and communities. As a result, he campaigned vigorously for Italian to be one of the languages studied in New York City schools.

Meanwhile, through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Italy’s Fascist government was promoting Italian language instruction in U.S. parochial primary

schools. Still, enrollment in Italian classes in New York City reached a high of only about 16,000 students in 1938, compared to 70,000-100,000 for French — even though there were an estimated 300,000 children of Italian origin in New York’s 38 Italian American communities in 1939.

“Having children learn standard Italian didn’t necessarily encourage communication between the generations and may even have raised difficult issues,” according to Carnevale. In many households, parents did not want their children to learn a more educated Italian that they themselves could not speak.

With little impetus to study the language, many children embraced American culture by abandoning their parents’ speech, which they felt “clearly reflected their position as uneducated immigrants...from Italy’s degraded south,” writes Carnevale. “We were becoming Americans by learning how to be ashamed of our parents,” wrote Covello.

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With the outbreak of World War II, the use of Italian in schools and homes fell dramatically.

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agreed to stop using the terms “Guido” and “Guidette” on its website and in its promotions.

However, as a result of the united protest of Italian Americans, three major sponsors so far have dropped the show: **American Family Insurance, Domino’s Pizza, and Dell PC Computers.** Dell also accused “Jersey Shore” of “ethnic bashing.” The CSJ’s Haemmerle sent each sponsor a letter of thanks for their responsiveness. Stay tuned.

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THE ENEMY’S LANGUAGE

With the outbreak of World War II, the use of Italian in schools and homes fell dramatically, for it was viewed as “a marker of potential disloyalty,” writes Carnevale. “By the time the United States entered the war, Italian language instruction had been eliminated from two-thirds of the high schools and colleges nationwide where it had previously been taught.”

Even as Italian speakers were recruited to join U.S. intelligence efforts behind enemy lines in Italy, government posters on this side of the Atlantic warned readers not to speak “the

enemy’s language.” “No Italian spoken for the duration of the war” signs popped up in storefronts in Italian neighborhoods throughout the country to prove the owners’ patriotism.

Fearing the prospect of internment and being labeled as “enemy aliens,” Italian Americans who had been accustomed to speaking Italian during their club meetings switched to English, as did several Italian American publications. Indeed, the number of Italian language periodicals in the United States reportedly dropped by 40 percent between 1942 and 1948, according to Carnevale.

AFTER THE WAR

The post-war exodus to the suburbs broke up many longstanding Italian American communities, further diluting their language traditions, while a drop in immigration from Italy in the second half of the 20th century meant few new immigrants to keep alive the Italian tongue on American shores. Thus, concludes Carnevale, “Italian Americans had little motivation to speak Italian or pass it on to future generations, and good reason to abandon it.” The reverberations of this complex history still echo today.

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“We have worked very hard to develop these initiatives,” says DiTrapani. “because they will help ensure that the Sons of Italy remains the vibrant, healthy, and

prosperous national organization it has been for more than a century.”

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Sons of Italy staffers Diane Crespy, Anamarie Ford and Zac Milner contributed to this article.