

“When I Call My Mother I Speak to Her in Italian”: Language Use and Negotiation Among Italian Canadians

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Abstract

This paper employs oral testimonies from numerous sources, among them the digital files of the *Multicultural History Society of Ontario*, to examine the ways in which Italian immigrants have used language, what purposes it has served in their integration and in the formulation of immigrant identities, and how they have navigated and employed the multiple languages at their disposal for different purposes. It aims to consider not only how language is discussed by those who use it, but also how it is treated and negotiated during the oral testimony process itself. It recognizes that the issue of language is an integral element of immigrant testimonies, both as the subject of recollections, and as an active presence in the structure of the narrative. It acknowledges the evolving nature and role of languages in subsequent generations, and ultimately argues that immigrants are autonomous beings who constantly negotiate and play with the numerous languages at their disposal in a strategic manner.

In 1977, Miranda Canella sat down with an interviewer from the *Multicultural History Society of Ontario* (MHSO) to recount her immigrant experience.¹ Eloquent

¹ The title of this paper comes from an interview with Tina Campolo, whose mother immigrated to Canada and now speaks English proficiently. Tina explains that while all members of her family are able to communicate in both English and Italian, she makes a conscious choice to speak Italian to her mother. See Allyson L. Eamer, “Language, Culture, and Identity Negotiation: Three Generations of Three Immigrant Families in Toronto,” (PhD diss., York University, 2008), 362.

Most of the oral testimonies referenced in this paper have been retrieved from the digital collection of the *Multicultural History Society of Ontario* (hereafter referred to as MHSO). The MHSO was founded in 1976 by a group of University of Toronto scholars and was designed as a space to

and vibrant, Canella guided the interviewer through what she considered the major events of her migration from Sicily to Toronto, following a narrative that had obviously been massaged and perfected for decades. She reminisced about life in Sicily, recounting every detail about her crossing in 1954, reflecting on the early years in Canada and on the impact of migration. Though never explicitly addressed by the interviewer, woven throughout Canella's narrative is a simple but significant theme of language; it is present when Canella remembers her difficulties settling in Toronto, when she reflects upon the importance of learning English, when she compares the use of her regional language and standard Italian in her home. In all of these cases, Canella is including a special place in her narrative for the navigation of multiple languages, which she sees as an important factor in the immigrant experience. But it does not end there. Canella's testimony is itself a reflection on how the immigrant experience is coloured by an ongoing negotiation of multiple languages, a process that is in constant flux for the duration of the immigrant's life, and which in fact propagates itself throughout generations and even throughout communities. This paper will examine the ways in which Italian immigrants in postwar Toronto have employed languages, what purposes they have served in their integration and in the formulation of immigrant identities, and how they have navigated and employed the multiple languages at their disposal for different purposes. It is a work of immigration history, one that is particularly interested in the evolution of ethnic identities and the processes of negotiation that it begets.

Linguists have long been interested in the language of immigrants. Their efforts have resulted in a vast body of literature, which has allowed for a thorough understanding of language transfer, lexical interference, and code switching within immigrant communities. Among them, Marcel Danesi and Gianrenzo Clivio's work, focusing on Italian immigrants in North America, has done much to illuminate how this particular group managed the two (or more) languages at its disposal.²

In 1985, Danesi wrote about what he called "ethnolects," which he defined as "a version of the language of origin, which, primarily as a consequence of frequent borrowing and adoption of words from the culturally dominant language [in this case, English], has come to characterize the speech habits of the immigrant

collect and preserve materials dealing with immigration and ethnicity. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the institution recorded oral testimonies with immigrants from many ethnic groups in Toronto. Although their condition varies greatly, we have access today to hundreds of recorded testimonies of Italian immigrants and their descendants. Notably, the *MHSO* is "committed to bringing to a wide public audience the positive aspects of living in a multi-ethnic province."

² See Gianrenzo Clivio and Marcel Danesi, *The Sounds, Forms, and Uses of Italian: An Introduction to Italian Linguistics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

community."³ Danesi explained that for the Italian Canadian community, an ethnolect labeled "Italiense" (a combination of "Italian" and "Inglese," or English) became a primary mode of communication within the community, in many cases even supplanting those regional varieties that had been brought from the 'Old World.' Danesi, Clivio, and others explored linguistic characteristics of the Italian Canadian community, such as vocabulary formation and the development of phonetic and grammatical adjustments.

The work of these linguists marked an important turning point that differed from previous works that explained the retention of an ethnic language as an impediment to integration. Danesi reversed this argument, arguing that it was precisely this negotiation between the two languages that proved that the immigrant was undergoing a process of gradual settlement. He argued that the ethnolect was not a permanent fixture, but that it was "an adaptive mechanism" used by immigrants to navigate the initial psychological or social realities that they faced.⁴

Despite these advances, the important contributions of linguists have remained within the confines of the technical construction of language. Their influences are limited with regard to how one understands the significance of these constructions and the particularities of when and how they are employed. In order to address these questions, this paper merges studies on language from numerous disciplines—including history, linguistics, the social sciences, and philosophy—with oral testimonies, and aims to read 'between the lines' of these accounts to consider not only how language is discussed by those who use it, but also how it is treated and negotiated throughout the account itself.

Language is not simply a way to relay information between people; instead, in specific situations, such as the initial period of migration and the unease and uncertainty that accompanied it, language could take on a very important purpose. What other roles did language play in the immigrant experience, and the experiences of subsequent generations?

In 1990, Wsevolod Isajiw attempted to understand to what extent ethnic

³ Marcel Danesi, "Canadian Italian: A Case in Point of How Language Adapts to Environment," *Polyphony* 7 (1985): 110-113.

⁴ Linguists have explored Italiense in great detail. A short but excellent example is a work by Jana Vizmuller-Zocco that explores how Italian Canadians navigate the verbal communication (what she calls the "speech act") of apologies and politeness, including an analysis of the pragmalinguistic rules of English, standard Italian, and regional varieties, and the role each of them holds in the 'speech acts' of Italiense. Works like these are incredibly informative, but they are beyond the purview of this paper. See Jana Vizmuller-Zocco, "Politeness and Languages in Contact: Italians in Toronto" *Italian Ethnicities: Their Languages, Literature and Lives. Proceedings of the 20th Annual Conference of the American Italian Historical Association, Chicago Illinois, November 11-13, 1987*, eds., Dominic Candeloro, Fred. L. Gardaphe, and Paolo A. Giordano (New York: American Italian Historical Association, Inc., 1990), 43-50.

identity could be retained from one generation to the next by studying various “ethnic patterns of behaviour” among different ethnic groups in Canada. Among the forms he studied is language. Isajiw found that among the Italians, knowledge level of the ethnic language, based on oral use and comprehension, remained relatively high in the second and third generations, particularly compared to other immigrant groups. More interestingly though, Isajiw found that for successive generations who retained the knowledge of the ethnic language, that same language changed its function. It no longer served a purely instrumental purpose, but instead became symbolic; for subsequent generations, language had shifted from a means of communication to a symbol or means of “identity reinforcement.”⁵

Linguists who subscribed to the linguistic relativity theory, which argued that the particular structure of a language determined its user’s worldview, further complicated the role of language. The hypothesis claimed that language had the power to affect how its diffusers saw and understood the world around them; simply put, language affects thought. This theory was rebuffed by scholars such as Noam Chomsky, who argued that language was, “merely a tool for expressing what [had] already been experienced and conceptualized non-linguistically.”⁶ For this group, language was divided from thought, and served only a functional purpose. This paper falls somewhere between these two schools of thought, arguing that language can be employed as a strategic tool, but that it also carries with it constructs that are unique to the experiences of its users. As such, language does, in a way, construct a worldview, albeit one that is flexible and in constant flux.

It is worth noting here that the work that follows is predominantly based on the use of recorded and/or transcribed oral testimonies. The reader should take into account the specific circumstances of the interview process: it is important, for example, to keep in mind that interviewees know that their interviewer is a fluent Italian speaker despite the fact that interviews are conducted in English. This means that any language shifts within the testimony do not pose a problem of disrupted narrative; interviewees are aware that their interviewer will follow their shifts

⁵ If we accept this interpretation of the symbolic purpose of language in succeeding generations, it presents an exciting opportunity to take up the invitations of historians such as Roberto Perin and Franca Iacovetta, who have long called for the study of immigrant history as a means of better understanding popular culture and Canadian history on the whole. A study that acknowledges this approach, in the words of Iacovetta, “considers the ways in which experiences and identities, and political and social phenomena [such as language] can be shaped by a multiplicity of overlapping and contradictory influences.” See Franca Iacovetta, “Manly Militants, Cohesive Communities, and Defiant Domestics: Writing about Immigrants in Canadian Historical Scholarship” in *Labour/Le Travail*, 36 (Fall 1995) 217-252 and Roberto Perin, “Clio as an Ethnic: The Third Force in Canadian Historiography,” *Canadian Historical Review* 64, no. 4 (1983): 441-459.

⁶ Eamer, “Language, Culture, and Identity Negotiation,” 5.

accordingly, a circumstance which would not occur with a monolingual interviewer, where language limitations may interfere with naturally-occurring language switches and may thus provide a testimony that does not accurately reflect the narrator's natural relationship with language. Borrowing from the linguistic relativity theory, this paper focuses on interviews where interviewees are welcome to employ all the languages at their disposal, in the hopes that doing so will prevent them from limiting or truncating their testimony due to a lack of language skill.

Alessandro Portelli, a pioneering scholar of oral history, has long argued for the importance of oral testimony as a unique tool for writing history. He contends that oral history is different from other sources in that it "tells us less about events as such than about their meaning." Portelli takes this one step further, arguing that the very testimony of the narrator is a display of the speaker's relationship to his or her own history. As such, an integral aspect of history is the element of subjectivity. To Portelli, "subjectivity is as much the business of history as the more visible 'facts.'" He goes on to note: "[w]hat the informant believes is indeed a historical *fact* (that is, the *fact* that he or she believes it) just as much as what 'really' happened...The diversity of oral history consists in the fact that 'untrue' statements are still psychologically 'true'."⁷ Thus oral history is a valuable *source*; while it does periodically fill in factual gaps of information, its true value is in its ability to elucidate the psychology and personal experience of those who lived said facts.

This characteristic can be used to shed light on the subjectivity and memory of a larger group. As Portelli puts it, such a source can tell us "not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did."⁸ In doing so, oral sources may turn out to be more reflexive of their speakers' lived experiences than other more peripheral sources. Daniel James points out that "oral testimony is more messy, more paradoxical, more contradiction-laden, and perhaps, because of this, more faithful to the complexity of working-class lives and working-class memory."⁹ Therefore, oral history as source can be extremely beneficial when studying something as fluid, evolving, and personal as language.

Overwhelmingly, moments of code switching (alternating between two or more languages within a single conversation) occur when the speaker recounts a particularly emotional, difficult, or trying memory, and it is worth noting to what extent the ethnic language serves as an aid or a form of support for the speaker when

⁷ Alessandro Portelli, "The Peculiarities of Oral History," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 12 (Autumn 1981): 99-100.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁹ Daniel James, *Dona Maria's Story: Life, History, Memory, and Political Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 242.

navigating the challenges of the specific subject matter. Nevertheless, the issue of language, whether or not it is raised explicitly by the interviewer, comes up consistently in immigrant testimonies as the subject of recollections and as an active presence in the *form* of their narrative. A closer study of these phenomena could serve to understand the place of language, and the value of oral history as method, in the Italian immigrant experience.

This paper reads not simply the stories and reflections told about language, but seeks to ‘read between the lines’ with the aim of mining the moments where interviewees revert or ‘switch’ to Italian or to their regional variety within their English-language interviews. As such, it seeks to use oral history not only as a source, but also as a *method*. As noted by Susan Geiger, “oral history only becomes a *method* in the hands of persons whose interests in it go beyond the immediate pleasure of hearing/learning the history being told. As scholars, we *use* information derived from oral history, and, in that way, it becomes a method.”¹⁰

A large number of the oral testimonies used in this paper were produced by the *Multicultural History Society of Ontario*, a non-profit educational institution founded by Robert Harney (among others), a historian at the University of Toronto, in 1976. Throughout the seventies, the *MHSO*’s primary mission was to fill the gaps of Canadian history by conducting hundreds of interviews with immigrants from a plethora of sending societies. The interviews would act as a voice for the ‘third force,’ those who had for so long been pushed to the edges of the Canadian narrative. Today, these interview tapes provide an impressively rich bank of sources, which speak as much about the *MHSO*’s history as it does about its subjects.

Insofar as the *MHSO* record provides a wealth of mineable oral history, it is not without limitations. Given its age, it is not surprising that the structure of the *MHSO*’s oral history project, to say nothing of the deteriorating quality of these resources, are problematic to say the least. Robert Harney’s *Oral Testimony and Ethnic Studies* provides a fascinating inside look into the *MHSO*’s interview process. Designed as a pamphlet to be handed out to scholars hired by the institution to conduct interviews, it introduces the major aims of the *MHSO*’s project and provides a working structure of what each interview should strive to be (complete with “Topics for Discussion” and “Sources for Ethnic History”). However much Harney insisted on the fluidity of the interview process and urged the interviewer to deviate from the pamphlet as needed, it is truly a relic of its time in the structure it set forth

¹⁰ Susan Geiger, “What’s so Feminist About Women’s Oral History?” *Journal of Women’s History* 2, no. 1 (1990): 170.

and the questions asked.¹¹ As such, it presents its present-day reader with an illuminating example of the problem of 'authority' within the oral history process. In the interviews studied here, authority necessarily rested in the *MHSO's* hands, though the extent to which interviewees contested and challenged this authority has been addressed by Sheyfali Saujani in "Empathy and Authority in Oral Testimony." As Saujani points out, the *MHSO* was "circumspect about the power relations embedded within its own knowledge-making practices, and there is no evidence that authority was meant to be shared in these interviews." She uses Portelli's notion of the "orality of oral evidence" to hear what is on the cassettes themselves, not just the words uttered, but the aspects that fall 'between the lines': the pauses, the laughter, the silence, and the changes of tone that do not come across through words alone.¹²

This problem of authority manifests itself most clearly in the concept of 'ethnicity' and who controls the application of such a term. In 1977, a year after the foundation of the *MHSO*, Isajiw wrote in the journal of *Canadian Ethnic Studies* about the state of ethnicity in a technological society. Therein, he argues that "ethnicity is not simply a matter of individual choice—it is a matter of ancestry, of membership and belonging. In other words, ethnicity is a matter of community."¹³ Although Harney's organization advocated a dynamic approach to the study of ethnicity as an ongoing and complex process, Saujani is quick to add that,

he did not ask whether the migrants saw themselves thus. For him, they simply were ethnic, and the ascription of ethnicity did not seem particularly problematic. [...] He simply took ethnicity as given, effectively ascribing subjectivities on grounds of culture or ethnicity while also reserving the right to define the category "ethnic," an assumption of authority so implicit as to be almost occluded.¹⁴

In effect, the very fact that interviews were conducted by such an institution, with their foci specifically on how the speaker felt, acted, and *lived* 'ethnicity,' disallowed the speaker the option of *not* expressing 'ethnicity,' whether organically or contrived. Such reflections point to the problematic nature of using *MHSO* interviews as a source. Even so, using the concept of orality to listen 'between the lines,' and acknowledging the limitations inherent in such sources, the *MHSO* record

¹¹ Robert Harney, *Oral Testimony and Ethnic Studies* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1978), 1-4.

¹² Sheyfali Saujani, "Empathy and Authority in Oral Testimony: Feminist Debates, Multicultural Mandates, and Reassessing the Interviewer and her 'Disagreeable' Subjects," *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 45, no. 90 (2012): 361-391.

¹³ Wsevolod Isajiw, "Olga in Wonderland: Ethnicity in Technological Society," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* ix, no. 1 (1977): 77-83.

¹⁴ Saujani, "Empathy and Authority," 381.

holds innumerable gems that continue to provide insight into the way language was used within the immigrant experience.¹⁵

The complexities of oral history are not the same in the second set of sources used here, namely written memoirs submitted by immigrants or their descendants to the *Canadian Museum of Immigration Pier 21 Online Story Collection*. The project does not provide participants with a set structure. Instead, it provides them with a blank page, and welcomes memoirs orally or in written form. The result is quite extraordinary. Some participants choose to outline the story of their family's journey from the 'Old World' to Canada in minute detail. Others contribute photographs with captions, poems of varying sophistication, or short blurbs with the narrative they have come to accept as the story worth telling. In the written format, it is difficult to get at the aurality of the testimony—but it is not impossible. While written memoirs differ greatly from oral testimonies, they too are acts of agency, conscious constructions of personal testimony. These written memoirs have been employed below with the aim of understanding the role that language played in the formulation of ethnic identity in the postwar period.

By the end of the Second World War in 1945, the Italian community in Toronto had been well established by previous waves of immigrants that had arrived around the turn of the century and had founded community churches, businesses, and social institutions. But the postwar wave was different in many ways. Approximately 450,000 Italians arrived in Canada between 1946 and 1970, with a large percentage settling in Toronto. This wave was characterized by its demographics, made up largely of families of young adults, possessing a relatively even gender ratio and large proportions of children. In contrast to an earlier wave, this one contained a large number of people who sought to make Canada their home. Lastly, this new wave was marked by low levels of education and middle to lower-class migrants, by large numbers of men and women who worked in trades and rank-and-file labour: people who sought to put their trade skills to use in their new homes across the Atlantic. In Toronto, they settled in urban zones with high proportions of Italians such as the St. Clair and College Street neighbourhoods, and thus came to live, work, and socialize among other Italians, as well as in close proximity to other ethnic group enclaves. The role that language played and would play in the lives of these people was marked by the particularities that characterized their wave of migration.

Studying language in the context of Italian immigration poses unique

¹⁵ Limitations in using oral history also include the complex role of the interviewer, and the subjectivity of memory. Scholarship that focuses on oral history and testimony, including works by Luisa Passerini, Alistair Thomson, Alessandro Portelli, and Michael Frisch tease out these concepts in far greater detail and with far more sophistication than is possible here.

problems. To begin with, the people who arrived in Canada from Italy did so not simply as speakers of Italian. More often than not they were also speakers of regional varieties of Italian. The immigrants who arrived post-World War II, made up overwhelmingly of Italians from the Mezzogiorno (the southern half of the Italian peninsula and Sicily), managed work, leisure, and daily life in regional languages, and many (but not all) had a working knowledge of Standard Italian.¹⁶ Overwhelmingly their access to Standard Italian was limited to interactions with the state. Children left the school system early, cutting short their formal instruction of the standard language, and increasingly regional varieties came to be seen as base, crude, and certainly of a lower status than the Standard Italian used in state institutions and by the upper classes of the country. As a result, and in contrast to other large immigrant groups, the large influx of Italian immigrants in postwar Toronto was exposed to English as a third (not second) language. It then entered a complex personal system where language evoked ideas of social structures, and as such, was an acute presence in the lives and minds of its speakers. In her analysis of immigrant theatre in the United States, Nancy Carnevale identifies one of the major themes in studying the Italian language in a new environment. She uses a comparative with Yiddish to highlight the highly divisive and contentious past of the Italian languages: “The greater disparity between Jewish and Italian immigrant culture is in the cohesive function that Yiddish traditionally served for Jews, that contrasts sharply with the linguistic diversity and rivalry of the dialects of Italy.”¹⁷ For its part, Canada presented these immigrants with yet another new language, English, but it also exposed them to other regional varieties of the ‘Italian’ language, other ethnic languages, and an explosion of possibilities of language negotiation as a result.¹⁸ Moreover, the social complexities of language that had coloured life in Italy did not disappear across the Atlantic, and in fact were often exacerbated or used strategically by the newcomers in a variety of ways.

Learning additional languages to one’s mother tongue occurs in different ways. In the case of English, the language was learned primarily through contact with members of the host society or educational institutions; Standard Italian and regional varieties were learned from parents, spouses, neighbours, and other Italian friends. The testimonies of virtually all participants attest to the use of formal English

¹⁶ Clifford Jansen states that 68.4 percent of Italians arriving in Canada originated in the South.

¹⁷ Nancy C. Carnevale, *A New Language, a New World: Italian Immigrants in the United States, 1890-1945* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 117.

¹⁸ The French language (and in some cases, both English *and* French simultaneously) was also an important new language for some immigrants to Canada. None of the interviews used here touch on the French language or on the intersections of English and French, and so it is not dealt with at length here. It is, however, an aspect of immigrant language and identity that deserves further study.

classes through churches or private institutions such as *Centro Organizzativo Scuole Tecniche Italiane (COSTI)*, without a prompt or question to introduce the subject. It is clear that formal language learning represents an important process in the immigrant experience, one that is not easily forgotten, and that continues to form part of what interviewees consider their immigrant narrative. In her written contribution to the *Canadian Museum of Immigration Pier 21 Online Story Collection*, Lidia Scornaienchi's testimony captures this concept well:

I started to attend evening classes at Brockton Public school on Dufferin Ave and Bloor Street West in Toronto... My special thanks go to [COSTI] because their assistance today I can sit in front of my computer and write this short memoir note of my journey to the dream land in English. The grammar may not be accurate, but that is my reflection and also the way I speak, so I love it. I must say going to the night school was one of the most rewarding step's I ever took in my life [sic].¹⁹

In their joint recorded testimony for the *MHSO*, Renata and Mario Ori recount their experiences of learning English, and though they are quick to mention the classes at St. Philip Neri on King Street, Renata places equal importance on "the Italian ladies that I knew around here," explaining that she "found some neighbours who were really very nice" and helped her navigate the new foreign language in her new foreign city. Both husband and wife attest to the importance of shopping, friends, and the neighbourhood in learning English. Additionally, Mario's language learning experience was primarily formed in the workplace, where he necessarily interacted with monolingual English speakers. Similarly, in his written testimony, John Lucente recalls: "I don't remember actually learning English, but I must have picked it up playing with neighbourhood friends that first summer before starting school."²⁰

In some cases, and particularly in the learning of Standard Italian or regional varieties by young children or non-Italian spouses, the primary method of language learning was informal. Children learned from their parents or other family members, or from socializing within an insular Italian community. Many of them also noted the

¹⁹ Lidia Ammirato Scornaienchi and Enzo Scornaienchi, "Italian immigrants Lidia & Enzo Scornaienchi" *Canadian Museum of Immigration Pier 21 Online Story Collection*, accessed January 2012, http://www.pier21.ca/wp-content/uploads/files/stories/immigrants/Italian_Immigrants_Lidia_and_Enzo_Scornaienchi.pdf.

²⁰ Mario and Renata Ori, "Italian Interview – Mario & Renata Ori" *MHSO*, n.d., accessed January 2012, <http://www.multiculturalcanada.ca/node/321114>; Giovanni (John) Lucente, "Italian immigrant Giovanni John Lucente" *Canadian Museum of Immigration Pier 21 Online Story Collection*, accessed January 2012, http://www.pier21.ca/wp-content/uploads/files/stories/immigrants/Italian_Immigrant_Giovanni_John_Lucente.pdf.

importance of Italian fixtures within the community, such as theatres and mass media, as having played prominent roles in their learning of Italian. It's worth remembering that however informal this language learning seems in comparison to the formal structure of group classes, more often than not parents made conscious decisions regarding which languages they spoke in front of and to their children, and those decisions were guided by numerous carefully considered factors. These will be discussed in further detail below.²¹

How language is learned can define how that language comes to be used by a particular group or individual. Thus English, which was learned often through occupational avenues or formalized classroom settings, became the language of work, of the street, and of the public, whereas regional varieties of Italian, learned among intimate social circles and in smaller, more private contexts, was privileged as the language 'of the home.'

But the language of immigrants cannot be divided so neatly. The migration experience is a unique one; it presents its actors with objects, places, and situations which are new to them, and which their existing language systems are incapable of communicating and effectively expressing. As such, new systems must be formed. *Italiense*, the ethnolect of Italian Canadian emigrants and their descendants, evolved precisely for this purpose. *Italiense* is unique to the place in which it is formed in that it adapts loanwords from English and develops phonetic and morphological adjustments that make speech 'sound' Italian. This fusion is not random; it has a linguistic logic that is explained elsewhere.²² But significantly, its genesis is not random either. As Danesi explains, it can serve to "fulfil a basic practical need to express a new psycholinguistic experience...It is through these newly acquired words that the immigrant comes to understand the new reality."²³ Such a conclusion implies that *Italiense* is employed as a transitory coping mechanism, one that may fall into disuse once its speakers have made a complete transition.

The creation of an ethnolect is not unique to the Italian community. It is further evidence that the Italian immigrant experience is complicated not simply by the intersection of two, but numerous languages. These include: regional varieties (which may be multiple if parents originate in different regions of Italy), Standard

²¹ Discussions of informal language learning are prevalent in most of the oral testimonies studied here. In particular, two couples that are interviewed together make repeated reference to the choice to speak dialect with each other but not to the children, and to the importance of Italian language radio and theatre productions in their children's language learning process. See Mario and Renata Ori, "Italian Interview," and Mr. and Mrs. Granzotto, "Italian Interview – Mario & Renata Ori" *MHSO*, n.d., accessed January 2012, <http://www.multiculturalcanada.ca/node/321071>.

²² See Danesi, "Canadian Italian."

²³ *Ibid.*, 110.

Italian (often learned through school in Italy or in the case of younger generations, heritage-language classes in Canada), English, and the new construction of Italianese, which may not be seen as a separate language in and of itself but which creates new structures that are often in negotiation with the others.

There are many factors that explain language choice among polyglots, and some of them are explored here. Situations where choices are made practically due to lack of option (such as in communication with monolinguals) are not explored. To begin with, one of the most pervasive factors for choosing to speak Italian or regional languages among Italian immigrants in Toronto is to connect to the past, or to appeal to a sense of nostalgia. The members of the Campolo family, for example, all described “an emotional connection to the language and culture of Italy,” which acted as a catalyst for the maintenance of their regional language as the language of the home, and which spurred Cristina, the third generation, to enrol in Standard Italian heritage language classes in Toronto.²⁴ Her mother Tina explains this emotional attachment to her mother tongue: “my sense of being, coming from an immigrant family who spoke Italian and coming from that culture...I wanted [Cristina] to benefit from being able to communicate and understand the culture that her grandmother and her predecessors [have] in terms of history.”²⁵

There are more subtle ways employed as well to display this loyalty. In all cases studied here, interviewees were introduced on tape and were asked the first question entirely in English. Many of them nonetheless chose to begin their testimony in Italian, and others still spoke in their regional language. Only upon the interviewer’s continuing English dialogue did they switch back to English. This is particularly noteworthy in the cases where the interviewee’s English was particularly strong or where it was admittedly their dominant language, and certainly their only language of communication with the interviewer and the outside world. This choice could thus be interpreted as a deliberate attempt on the part of the interviewee to identify as an Italian-language speaker, particularly in light of the situation. Under the red light of the record button, across the table from a representative of the *MHSO*, and under pressure (self-imposed or otherwise) to provide a compelling ‘immigrant experience’ story, it is not surprising that ‘being Italian’ is an important consideration for interviewees, one that many choose to display through language. In this way, language choice and code switching are dictated by a perceived need or desire to connect to a personal past, and to evoke a sense of loyalty which the

²⁴ Eamer, “Language, Culture, and Identity Negotiation,” 249. There has been much debate about how to define generations. In this paper I define the first generation as the first immigrant to arrive in Canada. Cristina Campolo is thus the granddaughter of a postwar immigrant.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 254.

interview process, and the abovementioned problem of authority, necessarily calls to reaffirm.

In much the same way, language can be used as a tool to connect with other people, most often to develop or maintain a level of intimacy that may suffer without the commonality of language. In her written memoir, Luisa Martin recalls: "I can still hear the sorrowful refrain from one of my mother's favourite records, '*Terra straniera che malinconia...*' which underscored those early years."²⁶ Martin refers to the lyrics of the song "*Terra straniera*," an old Italian song popularized by a 1967 recording by Connie Francis, an Italian-American ballad singer for an album of "Italian Favourites." The interviewee's mother must have felt a connection to the song's expressions of sadness, loneliness, and nostalgia in a foreign land.²⁷ But the song does not simply reflect the sad aspects of leaving one's mother country. More than a cry for a long lost love, it is a lament for the very fact that the author now lives in a different world. The sadness here is due to the fact that the author has already forgotten, and thus the song can be interpreted as an exercise in remembering. Interestingly, this is how the interviewee seems to use it: as a tool for remembering her late mother, to whom the song was so dear. She thus manages to simultaneously affirm her personal connection with her mother, assert their shared immigration story, and evoke a sense of nostalgia to a faraway past, all through language and song.

In a 1967 article in *The Daily Star* on the success of COSTI English-language programs, Mrs. Luigi Pellegrini explains that "I no understand my bambinos unless I learna inglese,"²⁸ a concern which is echoed by Renata Ori, who says that "after I had my kids, I had to go to school [to learn English]; it was more important to know."²⁹ These women use English as a strategy to maintain their close family ties with children who are increasingly identifying with the host culture in a way they cannot possibly mirror. Similarly, others use the same strategy with their mother tongue. In

²⁶ Luisa Martin (nee Papaiz), "Italian immigrant Luisa Martin nee Papaiz" *Canadian Museum of Immigration Pier 21 Online Story Collection*, accessed January 2012, http://www.pier21.ca/wpcontent/uploads/files/Italian_Immigrant_Luisa_Martin_nee_Papaiz.pdf.

²⁷ Lyrics are as follows: "Terra straniera ... Quanta malinconia!/Quando ci salutammo, non so perche/tu mi gettasti un bacio e fuggisti via,/eppure adesso, te lo confesso,/non penso a te .../Non li ricordo piu quegli occhi belli/pieni di luce calda ed infinita.../Mi son dimenticato i tuoi capelli/e la boccuccia ch'era la mia vita./Ma sogno notte e di la mia casetta,/la mia vecchietta che sempre aspetta.../L'amore del paese e della mamma/e una gran fiamma che brucia il cuor!/Questa tristezza, questa nostalgia/sono il ricordo dell'Italia mia!/Ma sogno notte e di la mia casetta,/la mia vecchietta che sempre aspetta.../L'amore del paese e della mamma/e una gran fiamma che brucia il cuor!/Mamma ... io morire di nostalgia/se non rivedo te ... e l'Italia mia!"

²⁸ Marie Flanagan, "Small Fry Play While Mamas Tussle With English," *The Daily Star* (Feb. 3, 1967), B272548, F2117, *Archives of Ontario*, Toronto.

²⁹ Mario and Renata Ori, "Italian Interview."

a 1973 interview, Wanda Vendruscolo explains that English has become her first language, but that she continues to use Friulian, a regional dialect, primarily to keep in touch with friends and family who remained in Italy.³⁰ Tina and Cristina Campolo also use their regular visits to Italy and their use of the language there as “instrumental in strengthening ties to (non-English speaking) relatives.”³¹ In these cases, the use of regional varieties and Standard Italian is strategic, in that it serves a particular purpose that allows the actor to maintain relationships that would otherwise be compromised.

There is another more peculiar way in which immigrants use language as a means of maintaining personal relationships, one that is not as evident since it does not appear eloquently in their recollections. Sarah Ippolito, a young child of Italian immigrants in 1940s Canada, is reluctant to speak Italian. Her recollections are entirely in English and she seems hesitant to invoke the Italian language in her testimony. But there is one instance where English does not suffice: prompted by her interviewer, Sarah recounts one of the countless folk sayings that she learned from her father: “The older you get, the stupider you get.”³² Sarah herself confirms that she does not identify as Italian, that she does not speak Italian, and that she does not associate with an ethnic Italian community. And yet, in a situation where she is faced with a personal, intimate recollection between herself and her late father, English is inappropriate, and only Italian will do. Similarly, in an anonymous interview from 1977, an Italian immigrant man recounts the story of his migration to Canada. His recollection is entirely in English, save for the few instances where the man directly quotes his brother’s letters. While English is adopted by the interviewee even in the presence of an Italian-speaking interviewer, he chooses not to paraphrase, but instead directly quotes his brother’s letters in the original Italian. This can be seen as an exercise to reaffirm a bond with his brother, one that existed only in Italian, and is thus remembered and relived in that way.³³

The same occurs when a woman recalls her experiences helping other incoming Italians at the immigration office in Halifax. As with the man above, her interview is entirely in English despite the fact that her interviewer is Italian Canadian and speaks both languages, yet she feels compelled to translate *only* the

³⁰ Leo and Wanda Vendruscolo, “Italian Interview – Leo & Wanda Vendruscolo” *MHSO*, n.d., accessed January 2012, <http://www.multiculturalcanada.ca/node/389620>.

³¹ Eamer, 251-2.

³² Translations are all the author’s own. Poor audio quality prohibited me from accessing the original text. Sarah Ippolito, “Italian Interview – Sarah Ippolito” *MHSO*, n.d., accessed January 2012, <http://www.multiculturalcanada.ca/node/383541>.

³³ Anonymous. “Italian Interview – Anonymous” *MHSO*, January 1, 1977, accessed January 2012, <http://www.multiculturalcanada.ca/node/321161>.

portions of her testimony that evoke dialogue between herself and other migrants. In particular, dialogue exchanged between her and newly landed Italian women are directly recounted in Italian, as are the answers she receives. In some cases the woman translates for her audience, but this is rare. For a moment such as this, the Italian language affords the woman a level of privacy in her recollection of the moment, one that necessarily excludes others. In this case, the *other* includes listeners who do not belong to her language group, an *other* symbolized in the recollection by the English-speaking immigration officers who depended on her language ability and thus could not penetrate or rival the power that she held in her relationship with the newly arrived women.³⁴ In many different ways, language choices are made to build or maintain personal relationships, or to exclude others and reaffirm a bond or intimacy that is strengthened (or even created) by language choices.

A significant consideration that affects language choice is social status, which in most cases explored here refers to upward socioeconomic mobility. A recurrent theme in immigrant testimonies is English as a source of power, a tool that offers increased opportunity. For migrants who mastered English and retained their mother tongue, interpretive responsibilities flourished formally and informally. While some obtained work because of their bilingual capacity (in the immigration office, for example), others used their language skills more informally, aiding family, neighbours, and friends during the initial period of immigration with their interpretive skills.³⁵

It did not take long for the idea of equating English with mobility to take hold and affect internal family dynamics. Some examples have been given above. Wanda Vendruscolo adds that though she originally spoke to her young children in Italian, she switched and began speaking English in the home when friends warned her that children who spoke their native tongue in the home suffered later when forced to learn English in different, less adaptive environments, such as the school system. Her decision to switch the 'home language' reflects a conscious parental choice to provide opportunity for future success, at the expense of a personal preference (as Renata Ori puts it, "it's good for tomorrow, you know...").³⁶ It is interesting to note that this process is pervasive explicitly, as in the cases stated above, as well as implicitly, as in

³⁴ Anonymous, "Italian Interview – Anonymous" *MHSO*, December 5, 1977, accessed January 2012, <http://www.multiculturalcanada.ca/node/205852>.

³⁵ *Ibid.* For example, Wanda Vendruscolo recounts that she learned English out of necessity, since she had no one to interpret for her when she first arrived. She quickly became an informal interpreter for successive waves of immigrants to her community, most significantly her husband. Leo and Wanda Vendruscolo, "Italian Interview – Leo & Wanda Vendruscolo" *MHSO*, n.d., accessed January 2012, <http://www.multiculturalcanada.ca/node/389620>.

³⁶ Mario and Renata Ori, "Italian Interview."

the following examples:

My younger brother spoke no English when he went to his primary grades. Yet some twelve years later, he would become a graduate from high school with the bishop's medal, and the lieutenant governor's scholarship for the greatest proficiency in Ontario, later to become the youngest graduate as an MD in Hamilton at the age of 23.³⁷

The [first] summer for me was very long. It was very hard to make new friends when one did not speak the language... I was demoralized and depressed... A few weeks later, things looked a lot brighter and I enjoyed school very much and went to university and later I obtained a professional accounting designation, which allowed me to hold several interesting and rewarding positions.³⁸

It is no accident that these stories begin by highlighting the lack of knowledge of English as an implied barrier, which, once overcome, allows for levels of success hitherto unimagined. For these people and others, the mastery of English is a marker of success, and it acts as a tool that provides further opportunities to those who master it.

Interestingly, other testimonies highlight the complete opposite, scenarios where language does not appear to be a barrier to success in the immigrant's new home. Such is the case with a man who arrived in Canada as a young adult and opened his own tailoring business in British Columbia before moving to Toronto. He is quick to point out (and to continuously return to the fact) that his business was very successful ("fantastic," he says) despite the fact that he could not speak English at all. The man does not indicate how his business succeeded without knowledge of the dominant language of the area, or if he served an Italian-speaking community exclusively, but this silence demonstrates that his method of measuring markers of success did not include language. The speaker's testimony implies that language is a barrier that could be overcome through innate ability, a strong support network, some amount of luck, and most importantly, hard work, though such a narrative may also be seen as a form of challenging the authority of the interviewer and his guided questions.³⁹

Language choice as a tool of social mobility often undergoes a hierarchical classification, particularly in the Italian case, which, as seen above, includes

³⁷ Anonymous, "Italian Interview – Anonymous" *MHSO*, January 1, 1977, accessed January 2012, <http://www.multiculturalcanada.ca/node/321161>.

³⁸ Cesidio Mariani, "Italian immigrant Cesidio Mariani" *Canadian Museum of Immigration Pier 21 Online Story Collection*, accessed January 2012, http://www.pier21.ca/wp-content/uploads/files/stories/immigrants/Italian_Immigrant_Cesidio_Mariani.pdf.

³⁹ Anonymous, "Italian Interview," January 1, 1977.

negotiation between numerous languages and ethnolects. Allyson Eamer cites Frances Giampapa's work on what she calls "linguistic conflict," indicating that the use of regional varieties is generally "associated with the older generation, a lower social class, and a lack of formal education." Eamer further explains that, "the language practices of Italian Canadian families seem to reflect the language policy in Italy. The privileging of Standard Italian over regional varieties and dialects was accelerated in post-World War II Italy, and was mirrored in Canada's Italian communities."⁴⁰ Cristina Campolo unwittingly demonstrates this hierarchy perfectly in her narration: "I was on the balcony and my cousin wanted me to go play with him on the grass so Nonna's like, 'Cristina, *sutto*.' I'm like, 'No, don't speak dialect, he's two, don't teach him that. Say '*sotto*'."⁴¹ This hierarchy is often acknowledged by interviewees: most of them freely admit that they have made the conscious choice to replace regional languages with Standard Italian in the home, particularly when speaking to children. Parents recount the consensual decision to retain a regional variety as the primary language between them, but to use only Standard Italian (or *Italiense*) in the presence of children. Children of immigrants recount overhearing a regional language and explain that more often than not they can understand it but not speak it.⁴² Selections such as this reflect an ordered hierarchy of languages, one that is based on a notion of language choice as a reflection of social mobility, and which can be negotiated based on particular situations to benefit all actors.

Of the numerous ways in which language is used, the most pervasive within these testimonies is the notion of belonging to a particular group. Language is used as a means of connecting to an immigrant experience, or in the case of subsequent generations, to a uniquely Italian Canadian lifestyle. This concept harks back to Isajiw's notion of ethnicity as fundamentally a community project. Interviewees consistently plug Italian words into their English interviews, and upon closer examination, commonalities in these occurrences arise. In countless migration stories conducted in English, words such as "billeto," (ticket), "pasaporto," (passport), and "la bateria," (in reference to Ellis Island), appear repeatedly.⁴³ The words that are left without translation are most often words that readers have identified as nodal points in their migration narrative. The English language in which the interviewees recount their story is unsuitable for certain situations, such as when retelling personal interactions between immigrants ("*vene con me*"). In "My Pier 21 Story, or How I

⁴⁰ Eamer, "Language, Culture, and Identity Negotiation," 257.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 256-7.

⁴² See for example interviews with Miranda Canella, Mario and Renata Ori, Mr. and Mrs. Granzotto.

⁴³ Anonymous, "Italian Interview," December 5, 1977 and Anonymous, "Italian Interview," January 1, 1977.

Vomited My Way from Tajedo to Timmins,” Luisa Martin writes, “one of my most vivid recollections is that of my father bursting into the kitchen on a bright and sunny day announcing excitedly and determinedly, ‘*Andiamo in America!*’”⁴⁴ On a less enthusiastic note, Miranda Canella’s memory of seeing the Halifax coast for the first time from the deck of the ship that brought her from Sicily is an experience unique to the immigrant experience, one which English, as the language of the host society, cannot depict satisfactorily. Canella’s smooth English narrative soon becomes interrupted with pauses: “It was...*come se dice strani?*” and “I just felt that I was *respinta*.”⁴⁵ Canella’s long-time work as an administrator in Canada has significantly contributed to an excellent proficiency in English, but faced with this particular memory, it seems to slip away.⁴⁶

In most English accounts then, it is significant that switches to Italian directly connect the speaker with aspects of the Italian immigrant experience, which seems to indicate that this experience is one that cannot be fully understood in English alone. In many ways, the use of Italian in these cases supports Michael Fischer’s concept of “inter-referencing,” which Carnevale aptly describes as the use of a language “that the immigrants brought with them as well as the language of the host country in the same speech event...along with references from the two cultures, to form a unique communication fully accessible only to insiders who have direct experience of living between two cultures.”⁴⁷ This usage and negotiation between languages serves as a method of belonging to a group, specifically, a community of immigrants or descendants who have grown up under its legacy. As Eamer explains, “there are expectations of the member [of such a group] held by both insiders and outsiders. Only by meeting those expectations can the member enjoy all the benefits and rewards of membership”⁴⁸; this concept is wonderfully exemplified by Tina Campolo’s recollection of how her husband (a fellow immigrant) navigated this tension of membership within the home: “when he sit down at the table, he want[ed]

⁴⁴ Luisa Martin (nee Papaiz). “Italian immigrant.”

⁴⁵ M. R. Canella, “Italian Interview – Miranda Romana Canella” *MHSO*, n.d., accessed January 2012, <http://www.multiculturalcanada.ca/node/321169>.

⁴⁶ A similar example is available in Lorenzkowski’s wonderful monograph on the ‘sounds’ of the German language. She recounts the story of a young German boy who writes a diary in German. After he turns 17, Louis begins writing only in English. But Lorenzkowski explains that “seemed strangely inadequate in times of despair. When his father died prematurely in the summer of 1880, Louis expressed his anguish in German, not English. He wrote the remainder of the diary for the year in his mother tongue, as if to preserve a tangible bond with his late father. If the German language had hitherto signified a world of childhood, it now transformed into an emotional bridge to the past.” In Barbara Lorenzkowski, “Languages of Ethnicity: Teaching German in Waterloo County’s Schools, 1850-1915” *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 41, no. 81 (2008): 11-12.

⁴⁷ Carnevale, *A New Language, a New World*, 124.

⁴⁸ Eamer, “Language, Culture, and Identity Negotiation,” 309-310.

[his daughters] to speak Italian to him. And when they call[ed] him 'daddy,' he sa[id] 'I'm not dad!... You call me 'poppa!'"⁴⁹ As such, inter-referencing in the presence of an interviewer and a recording device can also be seen as an exercise in asserting authority over the terms of the interview.

In much the same way, subsequent generations also exert their belonging to the community, albeit in different ways. Words that belong uniquely to that experience (and not to their experience as Canadians) remain unaltered. Cristina, a third-generation Italian Canadian explains: "we use Italian words when we speak [among school friends]...instead of saying 'my uncle' or 'my grandmother' – oh 'my zio' or 'my nonna'."⁵⁰ We may also attribute this quest for group membership to the enrolment of third-generation Italians in heritage language classes and Italian-heritage community groups, which reaffirms and encourages a unique structure of belonging for descendants of immigrants. In "Ethnics Against Ethnicity," Jonathan Zimmerman argues that for many immigrants, heritage language classes were rejected because they sought to impose a single language that was too rigid for groups of people who were accustomed to living among a "Babel of dialects." He argues that immigrants rejected "ethnicization" in the same way that they rejected "Americanization," and chose instead to create an ethnicity that was, in many ways, based on multiple language usage, including strong usage of English.⁵¹ To them, a genuine expression of ethnicity could not be classified uniformly by a structure of national heritage languages. Vizmuller-Zocco echoes the significance of English in Italian usage, concluding that English "has a much more pervasive role and its influence covers not only the lexical but also the pragmatic aspects of Italian."⁵²

In her written testimony, Joanne D'Agnolo explains that her languages do define her membership in a group, but she is quick to distinguish between an Italian group and an Italian Canadian group. She recalls a return trip to Italy: "Although I speak Italian fluently, I didn't feel a sense of belonging in Italy on my last visit...I will always be an Italian by birth, but I am proud to say that I am a Canadian by choice. Canada is a country that has allowed me to keep my traditions while accepting and encouraging diversity and where we can all be called Canadians."⁵³

⁴⁹ Ibid., 309.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 250.

⁵¹ Jonathan Zimmerman, "Ethnics Against Ethnicity: European Immigrants and Foreign-Language Instruction, 1890-1940," *Journal of American History* 88, no.4 (March 2002): 1383-1404.

⁵² Vizmuller-Zocco, "'Politeness and Languages in Contact,'" 50.

⁵³ Giovanna (Joanne) D'Agnolo (nee Iannetta), "Italian immigrant Giovanna Joanne D'Agnolo nee Iannetta" *Canadian Museum of Immigration Pier 21 Online Story Collection*, accessed January 2012, http://www.pier21.ca/wp-content/uploads/files/stories/immigrants/Italian_Immigrant_Giovanna_Joanne_DAgnolo_nee_Iannetta.pdf.

Significantly, D'Agnolo's testimony affirms her membership by clarifying her fluency and birthright, but she is careful to identify as a hyphenated Canadian; her definition of membership is centred around a unique concept of Italian Canadianness which is neither one or the other.

This paper has outlined several ways in which language was used and negotiated by Italian immigrants and their descendants. At this point it should become clear that language cannot be discussed solely as a static tool used for communicating information. It is much more than that. But much work remains to be done. The way that language negotiation interacts with gender, for example, is an avenue in need of exploration, to say nothing of the development of negotiated language among immigrant children. The role of language in the immigrant experience is significant. As Lorenzowski notes, these "meanings of language...point to the intricate ways in which a sense of cultural identity was embedded, and expressed, in practices of language use."⁵⁴ An oral history methodology implies that language is not merely a timeline between a start and an end point. Nor is it a process of slow shift from one language to the other mediated by an intermediary period of transfer (what linguists have defined as the role of Italian within the Italo-Canadian community). This is too simplistic. Rather, a much more accurate and interesting way to see language is as a dynamic network of possibilities, where the two or more languages of each migrant play with and off of each other, where they are heightened or lessened depending on the situation, and where each serves its own unique purpose in differing circumstances. This also brings to light the autonomy of the immigrant, who is constantly negotiating, whether consciously or unconsciously, between these possibilities. If seen in this way, a much more lively picture emerges of ethnic identity formation and integration, one which is more accurate and representative of the lived experience of Italian immigrants and their descendants.

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⁵⁴ Lorenzowski, "Languages of Ethnicity," 12.