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The Languages of Italy: An Examination of the Vitality of Standard Italian and Dialects in
Contemporary Italy, and the Role of Dialect Speakers in the United States

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I. Abstract

In this thesis paper, I address the question of linguistic shift in the context of Southern Italian dialectology. I break this study up into two parts. First, I discuss the decline in usage of regional dialects in contemporary Southern Italy, particularly the regions of Calabria, Campania, and Sicily, and provide an assessment of their current vitalities and popularities. Then, I address the role of Italian dialect speakers abroad, specifically in the Italian American context, in this dynamic of linguistic evolution, extinction, and survival. Along with factual data and statistics describing the vitalities of the dialects in Italy, a selection of eight interviewed subjects provide their own personal experiences as Italian Americans who speak a dialect which originates from these regions. Through my analysis of the linguistic history of the regions named, in conjunction with their more general histories, I provide an accurate account and background of each dialectal language and its usage. This essay also addresses how Italian Americans can fit into the overarching history and linguistic phenomenon. The collection of data and the analysis presented in this thesis provide insight into the circumstances of linguistic shift, as well as how speakers who happen to be abroad might ameliorate or affect the status and vitalities of dialects of a particular nation.

II. Introduction

The phenomenon of language attrition and language loss is one which has befallen countless languages and dialectal variations of languages throughout history. This is especially the case for those of indigenous or minority populations who have no developed writing systems nor teaching methods through which their languages can be passed down from generation to generation. In such cases, these languages are not considered to be standard or official languages that are of enough value to warrant a significant effort towards preservation for future generations. As a result, language attrition, the loss or death of language, occurs. This is typically at the hands of a dominant language which gains more popularity as years pass and new generations come about.

The story of the Italian language and dialects is one which bears ancient roots extending deep into the history of Empirical Rome. Since these times, the phenomena of language evolution and language attrition have been ever present in the linguistic history of Italy. However, the level of attrition of Italian dialects is especially apparent throughout the course of the last century in Italy. It is quite evident that dialectal languages have been experiencing significant decline in usage and prevalence in various linguistic domains, such as academic, professional, and media outlets, as a result of standard Italian becoming an ever more dominating language in the country (for the purposes of this paper the *official/national* language of Italy will be referred to simply as Italian or standard Italian). As a result, intergenerational transmission, that is, the passing of a language from parent to child, has decreased as well.

However, the vastness of Italian dialectology and its vitality is not limited to only those speakers living in Italy. In fact, it is quite robust in terms of its usage in other parts of the world. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, millions of Italians emigrated from their

homelands, also commonly referred to as *la patria* meaning home in Italian, and established themselves as immigrants in other parts of the world. These people came from all regions of Italy and were in search of economic opportunity, personal freedom, and social mobility. The United States was an exemplary receiver of such immigrants, especially during the mid to late twentieth century following the Second World War. Along these journeys, these immigrants brought their languages, their dialects.

When examining the history of Italian dialectology and its evolution, it is imperative to include this aspect of the immigrant perception, particularly, that of the Italian American. In this way, the opinions, thoughts, feelings, and even predictions of Italian dialect speakers can be recorded and incorporated into the general understanding of the linguistic history of Italy's dialectology. In this paper I deliver such a discussion through my work conducting interviews with Italian American speakers of Italian dialect in conjunction with consultations of statistical sources.

First, I provide a succinct review of all literature consulted for this project. I discuss linguistic theory, statistical data, and the history of Italian language and dialects, each of which provide for background information on the concepts used to describe the current state of Italian dialects.

Second, I discuss the ideas of language endangerment, Italian language and dialectology in contemporary Italy, the endangerment of Italian dialects, Italian Americans and the question of language and dialect, and finally the interview portion.

In the last portion of this paper, I include an appendix. This appendix consists of two selected interview transcriptions as well as profiles of each of the eight individuals who took part in the interview process. The selected interviews are those of Maria F. and Federico S. These

interviews are included into this project in their complete forms as they provide outstanding and highly interesting insight into the experience of Italian American speakers of Italian dialect from the points of view of individuals from diverse generations and life circumstances. They were exemplary in terms of their contributions to the findings of this research as well as the points they raised in answering the questions posed to them. The profiles contain brief introductions to each person interviewed and provide information regarding their places of birth, education, and levels of familiarity with the Italian language and dialects.

Together, each portion of this thesis provides an insight into the linguistic history and linguistic vitality of dialects from three regions of Southern Italy: Calabria, Campania, and Sicily. This study is subsequently enhanced with the nuances of the experiences and opinions of speakers living abroad in the United States who attest to their roles in the dynamic of language evolution.

III. Literature Review

This section presents an overview and brief analysis of recent research in linguistics and the history of Italian language and dialects to address three primary questions: 1) whether selected Southern Italian dialects (ie, Sicilian, Neapolitan, and Calabrian) are or are not in decline, 2) how their status affects the sociolinguistic climates of their respective regions, and 3) the role that Italian American dialect speakers (ie, Italian American individuals who speak a specific Italian dialect) play in the process of extinction or evolution and survival of these dialects. This literature concerns the topics of fundamental linguistics and language endangerment, Italian linguistics and dialectology, as well as brief analyses of Italian history and the histories of regional culture in relation to language. These sources are divided into two main groups and presented based upon these categories of research. These are: research pertaining to linguistic theory, and research pertaining to historical and cultural data. These two overarching themes are reliant upon each other when seeking to create a comprehensive account of the issue of language loss and endangerment in Italy as well as for Italian American speakers of Italian dialect.

Linguistic Theory

David Crystal, a British linguist and prolific writer on the subject of language death and endangerment, provides a fundamental background to the linguistic theory surrounding language endangerment and shift in his book, *Language Death* (2000). In Chapter 1 of his work, Crystal defines various concepts relative to this linguistic phenomenon, including the death of a language and categorizations of language according to prevalence and usage. He also offers a concise interpretation of the difference between a language and a dialect, and useful insights into how

this discernment is highly relative to the study of language endangerment. Crystal presents the idea that language and dialect ought not to be described as dichotomous, which is the most popularly accepted view. Instead, he slightly departs from the views of other analysts of language and dialect by explaining that if two languages are intelligible between each other, they can be considered dialects of one another. This is similar to the case of dialects in Italy as many of them, especially those in close geographical proximity to one another, tend to be easily understood by speakers from different regions.

In the third chapter of his book, Crystal explains why languages and dialects dwindle, eventually die and give rise to sociolinguistic evolutions. He explains that there is no single cause leading to language death, but rather, such a shift occurs as a result of an amalgamation of various internal and external influences. He then outlines the most prominent factors that contribute to language loss, including but not limited to sociopolitical contentions, natural disasters and disease and economic fluctuations, and couples these factors with analyses of examples of each. This chapter provides a fundamental background to the study of linguistic methodology, necessary to examine and comprehend the issues concerning linguistic endangerment and evolution that are relevant to this thesis. These chapters of Crystal's book, serve as introductions to linguistic theory, most especially, in terms of dialectology and the nature of language loss.

Joshua Fishman, an American linguist and a specialist in the sociology of language, bilingual education, and language and ethnicity, analyzes the relationship between language and culture in his article, *What Do You Lose When You Lose Your Language?* (1996). In this article adapted from a speech Fishman gave at a symposium concerning the stabilization of indigenous languages in November of 1994, Fishman describes the level of severity and dependency that

exists between language and culture, especially in terms of survival or linguistic revitalization attempts. He contributes substantively to the argument that the survival of culture, whether it be of an indigenous, regional, or minority group, is seriously contingent upon the upkeep and promulgation of local language, especially when this is confronted with the encroachment of dominant or official national language, even if its speakers no longer live in the country of origin. He continues his argument by asking the question: *What can be done? How?* Fishman provides several examples, such as the study of Native American culture in light of language shift and the revitalization of Hebrew, each of which supports his claim. Fishman's reasoning is founded upon the concept that language is a symbolic element or even a summation of culture as a whole, and is inextricably linked to culture and its continuation. Fishman goes on to describe the efforts that a people or a culture suffering the effects of language loss or potential language loss can make in order to reverse the trends of linguistic decline. This article supports the idea that language and culture share a bond and are not mutually exclusive elements in the sociopolitical makeup of a people or a community, whether they reside in their country of origin or abroad as is the case for many speakers of Italian dialects residing in the United States.

A prolific writer and a professor at Stony Brook University, Lori Repetti agrees with Fishman's school of thought in her article, "Teaching about the Other Italian Languages: Dialectology in the Italian Curriculum" (1996). Repetti takes a pedagogical approach to the subject as she subscribes to the idea that language and culture are intrinsically fused and thus require mutual support to ensure survival. This, she states, is especially true in terms of Italian regional dialectology and regional culture. She describes Italy as a highly diversified cultural and linguistic entity that is home to a wide array of languages, each of which offers a vastly different yet highly valuable nuance to the study of Italian, especially in an academic setting. In her

article, she makes the distinction that language and dialect are synonymous, especially in the case of Italian linguistics. This ideology echoes that which Martin Maiden presents in his book, *A Linguistic History of Italian* (1995), where he clarifies the definitions of language and dialect in terms of Italian linguistic development. For this reason, Repetti states, Italian dialectology is a subject worthy of great attention, most especially in schools and academic programs, including those in higher education in which Italian Language is studied. Repetti then proposes ways in which Italian dialectology can be successfully implemented into Italian language programs. Her study is both compelling and clear in exemplifying that existing scholarship is interested in the topics of preservation of Italian dialectology in contemporary Italy.

Lenore A. Grenoble, Professor of Russian and Linguistics at Dartmouth College, and Lindsay J. Whaley, Professor of Classics and Linguistics at Dartmouth College, also provide key information concerning the idea of revitalization and how linguistic shift is actually a worldwide phenomenon. In selected chapters from their book, *Saving Languages: An Introduction to Language Revitalization* (2006), the authors present critical theory that is foundational to the idea of revitalizing endangered languages by presenting a series of case studies coupled with linguistic theory. The main purpose of this piece is to expel the idea that revitalization of a language experiencing attrition is impossible, and to explain just how crucial this issue is to the preservation of cultural heritage and identity on a global scale. Throughout their piece, Grenoble and Whaley maintain their goal of providing an answer to the question of how language revitalization efforts can succeed in our contemporary world, in which globalization and mass communication are constants and influence the attrition of minority languages.

Statistical Data

Statistical data accurately describe and categorize the vitality of the three dialects discussed in this thesis. Sources like *Ethnologue Database*, *Istituto Nazionale Di Statistica (ISTAT)*, the *US Census Bureau*, and the *Center for Immigration Studies* provide collections of statistical evidence pertaining to the speakers of the languages discussed in this thesis.

Ethnologue database is an exceptionally useful resource, which functions as an encyclopedic source with the added benefit of an interactive interface. Each *Ethnologue* entry provides a remarkably clear and organized set of data sheets, which analyze world languages and offer a general categorization of each language in terms of its official classification and family, its prevalence and vitality in its region of origin, its speaker population, as well as information pertaining to its usage and the sociopolitical domains in which it can be expected to be heard as a primary or secondary form of communication. This database was greatly useful in the characterization of Italian as the official language of Italy, as well as in the research on the dialects here examined, including Neopolitan-Calabrian and Sicilian.

The Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) also offers excellent insights into the current linguistic situation in Italy. In addition to data and statistical analyses, it suggests possible reasonings behind the patterns in linguistic shifts that this thesis detects.

Finally, the *Ambasciata d'Italia in Washington DC*, *US Census Bureau*, and the *Center for Immigration Studies* have provided detailed information regarding the usages of Italian language and Italian regional dialects in the United States as a result of immigrant populations from Italy. This information pertains to the status of the Italian language in contemporary America as well as the American past.

History of Italian Language and Dialects

In his 2014 book, *A Concise History of Italy*, British historian Christopher Duggan, provides an exceptionally thorough and succinct overview of the various eras of Italian history beginning with ancient times leading up to the modern day. Throughout the book, Duggan chronicles Italian history through the concept of “nation building” and emphasizes the level of complexity and transformation that the peoples inhabiting the Italian peninsula and the numerous governments that they established underwent from the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 AD, to the Italian Unification during the 1860s and 1870s, to the present day. Duggan offers a concise history of Italy by considering an array of social and geographical policies. As this thesis project considers an array of social and geographical politics in Italy, in particular those concerning Italian language, culture, and regional diversity, Duggan’s work is essential in contributing to a greater background understanding of fundamental Italian history for the question addressed in this paper.

In tandem with the style of Duggan’s brief study on the general history of Italy, author Roy Palmer Domenico delivers a highly informative survey of regional Italy. The author provides detailed information regarding the history of regional Italy dating back to their initial manifestations at the times of feudal kingdoms and geopolitical separation, leading into contemporary times. This, he makes clear, bears a great connection to the level of cultural diversity and multiplicity that exists within the nation in terms of regional and cultural identity. Domenico explores concepts such as history, geopolitical and economic climates, as well as cuisine, tradition, and linguistic variation among the regions. Domenico’s work is essential in accurately characterizing each region relevant to this thesis, in particular, those of Calabria,

Campania, and Sicily. He goes into great detail in each instance, especially in terms of conveying the rich myriad of regional linguistic variations that have developed in Italy over time.

Linguist Martin Maiden, Professor of Romance Languages at Oxford, provides a general history of the Italian language in his piece, *A Linguistic History of Italian* (1995). Similar to the style of Duggan, Maiden discusses Italian linguistics in terms of broader historical concepts which help to curtail and guide his explanation of the emergence of the official Italian language from the collection of languages spoken in Italy that are now considered regional dialects. Here, Maiden establishes the fact that the Italian language considered as “official” in contemporary Italy is no different than any regional dialect. In fact, it was a dialect itself; yet, through its popularization via such sources as mass media, literature, etc., it became the dominant language in Italy. He provides answers to the quintessential question of why Italian grammar and language are the way they currently are by examining the linguistic trends of Italy throughout the nation’s recent history. Specifically, Maiden devotes a chapter of his piece to the study of Italian dialectology in regional Italy. He examines the advent of the Italian dialects and draws comparisons between each major grouping of dialects to what has become the official Italian language of Italy. This manual proved highly informative when gathering information concerning each dialect and specific nuances of each.

In 1997 Maiden collaborated with Mair Parry, Professor Emeritus and Senior Research Fellow in Italian at the University of Bristol, in the creation of a published collection of essays and encyclopedic entries entitled *The Dialects of Italy* (1997). In this book, Maiden and Parry gather forty-five pieces of research written by various specialists in the fields of Italian linguistics and dialectology, as well as by experts versed in the study of Italian linguistic shift in contemporary Italy. This piece, which functions as a technical manual of sorts, offers chapters on

the geographical distribution of the dialects, individual entries on the regions in question, as well as a series of sociolinguistic approaches to the understanding of regional dialects spoken in contemporary Italy as well as abroad. One compelling section of the work concerns the topic of Italianization of the dialects, a topic which substantiates the argument that Italian regional dialect is in decline due to the cause of domination by a more heavily utilized and popularized official language.

Hermann W. Haller, professor of Italian at Queens College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York, also comments on the phenomenon of Italianization in his work, *Italian Speech Varieties in the United States and the Italian-American Lingua Franca* (1987). Here Haller comments on the effects of Italianization in the Italian context in various regions of Italy as well as in the United States. He devotes particular attention to the usage of dialects by Italian Americans during the early waves of Italian immigration to the United States. Haller's work provides this thesis with information directly pertaining to the history and status of Italian dialects in contemporary Italy as well as in the United States among Italian Americans and in the context of immigration.

Massimo Cerruti, professor of linguistics at the University of Turin, echoes the sentiments of Maiden in his piece *Italiano e dialetto* (2020). In this work Cerruti emphasizes the relationship that dialectal languages have with the official language of Italy. He touches upon the perception of dialects as a somewhat inferior form of language and its usage in limited domains as a result. This, he argues, is a key factor in the decline of the continuation of dialect between generations, from parent to child. Despite this trend, Cerruti argues, Italian dialects continue to reappear in various mediums of youth culture. For example, in music, electronic communication,

stores and brands, etc. Cerruti thus makes the claim that while the number of speakers of Italian dialects is statistically quite low, the dialect seems nonetheless to persist in contemporary culture.

In his article for the Treccani online Italian encyclopedia website, Cerruti explains his view on dialectology in contemporary Italy and individuals' general perceptions of the phenomena that he describes. After a review of data concerning the subject from the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), he concurs that dialectal language is in decline in contemporary Italy. He goes on to offer ways in which this trend can potentially be reversed or amended despite the attrition the languages might be suffering. Cerruti directly addresses the experiences and beliefs of native Italians and offers insight into the perceptions of those who actually live in Italy and witness linguistic evolution first-hand. Cerruti's general explanation was one which remained extremely noteworthy and appeared to encapsulate the sentiment of several of the aforementioned scholars on the evolution, extinction or survival of languages and dialects.

Contribution to Existing Scholarship

This paper specifically addresses the issue of language loss and shift in terms of Italian dialectology while concurrently examining the role of the Italian Americans as they pertain to the issue of language attrition. In order to succinctly answer the question posed, I have consulted and utilized each of the sources described above to create a more highly informed thesis supported by foundational understandings of the fields of history and linguistics. This is especially useful when accounting for reasons behind the linguistic shift occurring in present-day Italy, which tend to function as catalysts of a cultural shift as well. However, in my thesis I aim to take this collection of research one step further by considering the opinions and perceptions of Italians

living and Italians living in the United States, specifically, in the United States, in light of this linguistic evolution. This is aided by research and opinions gathered in personal interviews conducted by myself with individuals living in the United States but have had considerable, first-hand experience with Italian dialectology and regional language.

IV. Case Studies

In this section I will discuss the empirical data pertaining to this thesis and the questions it poses. When considering the vitality of Italian dialects and the role of Italian dialect speakers in America, I examine two types of case studies. My first case study consists of research and statistics on the current status of the following languages in contemporary Italy: Italian, Neapolitan-Calabrian, and Sicilian. This data is accompanied by my second case study, a small-scale research project considering the perception of the vitality of Italian dialects according to Americans of Italian origin or descent, who are dialect speakers themselves. This project was conducted by myself in the format of surveys and personal interviews with nine participants. However, prior to engaging with the data collected through the two case studies, it is first necessary to establish background understanding relevant to each of the topics at hand. This includes an overview of the issue of language endangerment, Italian language and dialectology in contemporary Italy, the endangerment of Italian dialects, and Italian Americans and the question of language and dialects, followed by their interviews.

Language Endangerment

In this section I provide definitions of basic linguistic terms, such as language, dialect, language endangerment, and intergenerational transmission. These terms are representative of fundamental linguistic concepts that are necessary as background knowledge for comprehension of this thesis argument.

Language is defined as a complex system of communication which allows humans the ability to connect and share thoughts, emotions, and sentiments with one another. *Ethnologue* states that language can be detected in many forms, whether it be in a grammatical sense such as

in written forms, or orally, such as in everyday speech, sign language or in song (Eberhard et al.). In this way, language not only functions as a verbal expression of thought, but also can be a multifaceted, poignant and direct indicator of social, cultural, or political identity. Essentially, the definition of a language need not be reduced to linguistic or grammatical style but can encapsulate an entire culture, way of life, or identity as is evident in the case of Italian and regional Italian dialects (Crystal 82-88). Each dialect is representative of a whole culture and way of life beyond simply the way one speaks or the words one uses.

In regard to the concept of dialect, there are various arguments and opinions regarding what the true definition of a dialect is. There is ongoing debate among linguists as to whether a dialect is its own language, or not. *Ethnologue* describes dialects in general as divergent varieties of languages that share many similar features to one another, yet can also differ from one another in several ways. The *Ethnologue* entry states that this distinction shall be based upon the level of overall divergence from that which is considered the standard, or official language (Eberhard et al.).

Let us examine the language dynamic of Italy as an example in this argument. Italian is the standard national language of Italy. Therefore, it is the language to which all other regional Italian languages or dialects are compared. If the dialect in question is still “sufficiently similar” to this standard language, then it remains a variation, or dialect, of said language. If it is vastly different however, for example as Sicilian Italian is different from Florentine Italian, then these can indeed be deemed separate languages, or separate regional dialects (*Ethnologue*). For the purposes of this paper, the languages of Sicilian, Calabrian and Neapolitan are each referenced as dialects or regional dialects of Italian. A discussion on the origins of these dialects will follow in subsequent sections.

Next, I address the topic of linguistic shift and evolution which relates directly to the existence of dialects and patterns of linguistic variations. It is evident that, due to a variety of reasons, language tends to change slightly, and sometimes significantly, over periods of time and space. This can be based upon factors pertaining to or effected by location, shift of political powers in said regions, cultural change, population growth or decline, and the level of transmission of a language from one generation to the next (intergenerational transmission). In the case of Italian linguistic shift and the dwindling usage of Italian dialects, intergenerational transmission, or lack thereof, is one of the most significant elements to this trend in Italy, especially in the regions addressed in this thesis.

Intergenerational transmission is defined as the passing of one's native language or mother tongue -- for the purposes of this explanation, this language shall be referred to as Language A -- to the children of the next generation. However, when this passage is interrupted by external factors, for example, political forces or cultural change, a second language, which shall be called Language B, starts to become the more dominant language among younger people. As a result, Language A suffers under the threat of the more popularized Language B. Language A dwindles in popularity and usage rendering it a minority, or endangered, language (Crystal 69-85). This is the case in Italy: Italian is Language B, the more dominant, popular language, while the regional dialects in Italy are Language A, experiencing decreased usage and transmission between generations.

Ethnologue characterizes a language's risk of endangerment due to interruption of intergenerational transmission with the aid of a scale developed by linguists Paul M. Lewis and Gary F. Simons, that is, the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) (Simon and Lewis 109-113). This scale is predominantly used to describe the trend of language

loss as a result of lack of intergenerational transmission. The scale, now widely acknowledged and referenced by linguists and researchers of language, is also referenced by *Ethnologue* as a primary method of grading linguistic transmission rates around the world. It consists of 13 scores, each providing a specific label and description of the current status of the language in terms of its vitality and usage between generations.

Table 1. Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS)

Level	Label	Description
0	International	The language is widely used between nations in trade, knowledge exchange, and international policy.
1	National	The language is used in education, work, mass media, and government at the national level.
2	Provincial	The language is used in education, work, mass media, and government within major administrative subdivisions of a nation.
3	Wider Communication	The language is used in work and mass media without official status to transcend language differences across a region.
4	Educational	The language is in vigorous use, with standardization and literature being sustained through a widespread system of institutionally supported education.
5	Developing	The language is in vigorous use, with literature in a standardized form being used by some though this is not yet widespread or sustainable.
6a	Vigorous	The language is used for face-to-face communication by all generations and the situation is sustainable.
6b	Threatened	The language is used for face-to-face communication within all generations, but it is losing users.
7	Shifting	The child-bearing generation can use the language among themselves, but it is not being transmitted to children.
8a	Moribund	The only remaining active users of the language are members of the grandparent generation and older.
8b	Nearly Extinct	The only remaining users of the language are members of the grandparent generation or older who have little opportunity to use the language.
9	Dormant	The language serves as a reminder of heritage identity for an ethnic community, but no one has more than symbolic proficiency.
10	Extinct	The language is no longer used and no one retains a sense of ethnic identity associated with the language.

Ethnologue.com/Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS)

This thesis examines Italian, as well as the Sicilian, Neapolitan, and Calabrian dialects according to the EGIDS standards.

Italian Language and Dialectology in Contemporary Italy

Italy is regarded as one of the most linguistically diverse nations in all of Europe (Coluzzi 214-215; Maiden & Parry 1-3). Unlike most other countries in Europe, Italy is home to substantial levels of linguistic variation, most notably in the forms of regional dialects, and minority languages, which exist throughout the Italian peninsula. Although linguists and researchers disagree on the exact number of languages that are currently used in Italy, it is estimated that there are at least forty languages spoken, half of which are not recognized by the Italian government as official regional dialects (Coluzzi 215).

Each of these languages have developed over the course of several centuries, as is evident through examples of documented text, oral tradition, as well as through the intergenerational transmission of language from parent to child, among others. This collection of shared long, complex, and heavily intertwined histories provides modern-day linguists and researchers with great records of the development and evolution of the Italian languages (Maiden & Parry 1-3). In this section, I briefly overview the development of the regional dialects and languages spoken in Italy and the history of the Italian national language in order to contextualize the relationship between linguistic evolution and usage.

First, it is essential to provide definitions for what constitutes a dialect and what does not in the Italian context specifically. As explained in Maiden's *A Linguistic History of Italian*, all languages in Italy, even the one considered to be the *official* or *national* language, are technically dialects of one another. Contrary to popular understandings, there is no 'base language' of Italian from which all sub-dominant dialects branch, nor is there a mother language which birthed the plethora of dialects that are currently in existence. Maiden writes, "The Italian dialects are not 'dialects of Italian.' And they are not 'daughters of' Italian, in the sense of being regional

variants of Italian historically descended from the original Italian language” (Maiden 2-3).

Rather, it is much more accurate to view Italian as a “*sister*” to the variety of Italian dialects that exist currently in Italy.

The difference between a dialect and a language, especially in the context of Italy, has been the subject of much debate amongst linguists for years. According to Maiden, no difference exists between a dialect and a language. Essentially, a dialect is a whole other language, in and of itself, and should be regarded as such (Maiden 3-4). Coluzzi agrees as he explains that what are commonly referred to as dialects of Italian are indeed languages, which do not derive directly from Italian, but rather, are independently evolved languages and varieties of Latin, the true mother tongue from which all variations of Italian derive (Coluzzi 216). Maiden illustrates the concept of Italian as “one of the crowd,” and indicates that this crowd is actually “Romance,” which is a collection of related linguistic varieties through their shared ancestry of Latin origin (Maiden 3-4).

Since the time of the Roman Empire, from the first century B.C. to the fifth century A.D., Latin was the dominant and most popularized language used in the Italian peninsula. It belonged to the “Italic” family of languages and was sister to several extinct languages such as Umbrian, Oscan, and a variety of Celtic languages (Maiden 5-6). As the centuries passed, the Roman Empire fell, new governments and rulers were established, and Italy was thus subject to a series of political and cultural changes, language being no exception. And so, as external influences began to subtly bring change to Latin’s dominance in Italy, linguistic shift became inevitable. Latin began to be broken up into series of linguistic varieties, each originating from a different region and community under the influence of external forces. Nonetheless, Latin was maintained

for use in ceremonial settings, such as in the Catholic Church, and formal or ceremonial writing, such as the Bible or certain works of literature (Maiden 3-7).

Italian descends from one of these linguistic varieties of Latin. Specifically, it derives from a linguistic variation of Latin which was spoken in the first millennium A.D. in the region of Tuscany, specifically in the city of Florence. Italian grew in popularity in the Middle Ages, during a period of significant political and cultural fractioning in Italy. As change swept the peninsula and regions began to section off into kingdoms and attempt to establish new autonomous governing bodies, it appeared that one thing remained: the profound appreciation of culture, specifically that of literature and writing. And so, it is because of an immense explosion of culture in Florence, namely the release of works of literature by Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarch and Michelangelo, just to name a few authors, that the Florentine language gained immense popularity and increased usage during the 14th and 16th centuries (Maiden 7-8).

However, these highly circulated works of literature featured a very complex and somewhat “formal” version of the Florentine variation. As a result, a more simplified version of this language was developed and promulgated in the mid-19th century by author Alessandro Manzoni, most especially as a result of the publishing of his work, *I promessi sposi* (The Betrothed), in 1840 (Maiden 9). The novel, now a cherished national treasure of Italy, featured a form of the Florentine variation that was considered suitable and applicable for usage in Italian daily life, whereas the more complex variation was deemed highly irrelevant to the Italian commoner (Maiden 9-11).

At roughly the same time, Italy underwent a period of revolution during the war of Italian Unification from the late 1850s to the early 1860s (Duggan 121-143). During this time in Italian history, the feeling of Italian national pride, despite regional separation and difference, increased

greatly. The rise of nationalism further aided the spread of the new version of Florentine as well. Italians acquired the new language and very quickly put it to use in a variety of domains in daily life (Maiden 9-10). This popularity extended into the 20th century as this linguistic variation gained enough recognition on the national stage that its usage and popularity remained strong and effective in comparison to other dialects in Italy.

The Endangerment of Italian Dialects

For the purposes of this project, I focus on three dialects of Italian, none of which are the Florentine as mentioned in the previous section. I discuss three Southern dialects, Neapolitan, Calabrian, and Sicilian, as case studies for this project. These dialects originate from the regions of Campania, Calabria, which are on the western coast of Southern Italy, and Sicily, which is located off the western coast of Southern Italy. Although many native speakers might consider these regions to be home to a plethora of languages, rather than simply three dialectal languages, data sources such as *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, as well as the published works of Maiden and Coluzzi for example, integrate these subsequent languages into the profiles of the overarching dialectal tongue of the region. Coluzzi is sure to notate this as he says, “All Italian regional dialects in fact are fragmented into hundreds of dialects” (Colluzzi 216). He also indicates that, despite the obvious variation that may occur when moving from town to town or village to village, the languages spoken will each assuredly fall under the umbrellas of the more commonly heard dialects from these regions, and will be included in the consideration of the data collected from the regions at large. To examine the vitality of these dialects in contemporary Italy, I will provide an analysis of the current state of each according to the *Ethnologue: Languages of the World* database. This database renews each entry every four years, and so, the

twenty-fourth edition cited in this paper contains current data pertaining to the 2021 status of the languages being discussed (Eberhard et al.).

Sicilian is a language spoken by those inhabiting the Italian Region of Sicily, which consists of the island of Sicily itself, located off the western coast of Italy in the Mediterranean Sea, as well as a collection of smaller, nearby island groups. Within Sicilian, there are several sub-dialects that are spoken as well. These include Western Sicilian (Central-Western Agrigentino, Palermo, Trapani), Central Metafonetica, Southeast Metafonetica, Eastern Nonmetafonetica, Messinese, Isole Eolie, Pantesco, Southern Calabro (Eberhard, et al). The Sicilian regional language has a current total user population of about 4,700,000 speakers (Eberhard, et al). It is classified as a language with a language status of 5* (Developing) on the EGIDS scale. This status indicates, “The language is in vigorous use, with literature in a standardized form being used by some though this is not yet widespread or sustainable for future generations” (Eberhard et al). This status is visually presented in the figure below in the context of the Language Cloud adapted from the EGIDS scale.

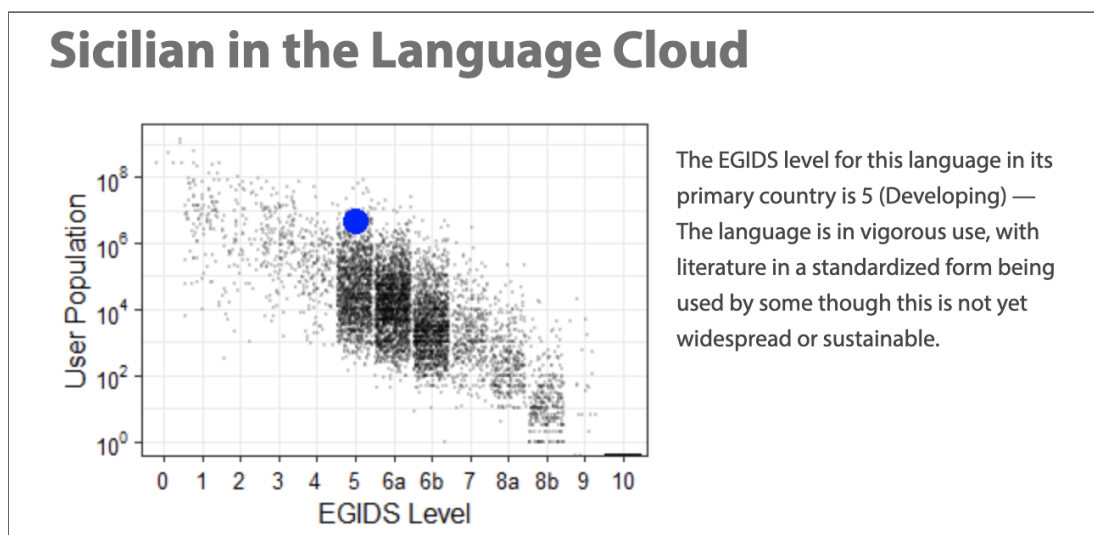


Figure 1

From Eberhard, David M., et al (eds.). “Sicilian Language.” *Ethnologue*

When considering Neapolitan and Calabrian, while the research presented by *Ethnologue* acknowledges that the languages are “reportedly very different from one another,” it nonetheless considers the two as one language group called Neapolitan-Calabrian. The languages that fall under the Neapolitan-Calabrian umbrella are spoken by those inhabiting the regions of Campania and Calabria on the western coast of Italy. As is the case with Sicilian, there are several sub-dialects of Neapolitan-Calabrian that are spoken as well. These include Neapolitan (Neapolitan, Tirrenic), Northern Calabrian-Lucano (Basilicatan, Lucanian) and some dialects of Southern Calabrian (Eberhard, et al). The Neapolitan-Calabrian regional language has a current total user population of 5,700,000 speakers (Eberhard, et al). Like Sicilian, Neapolitan-Calabrian is also classified with a language status of 5* (Developing) on the EGIDS scale. This status is visually presented in the figure below.

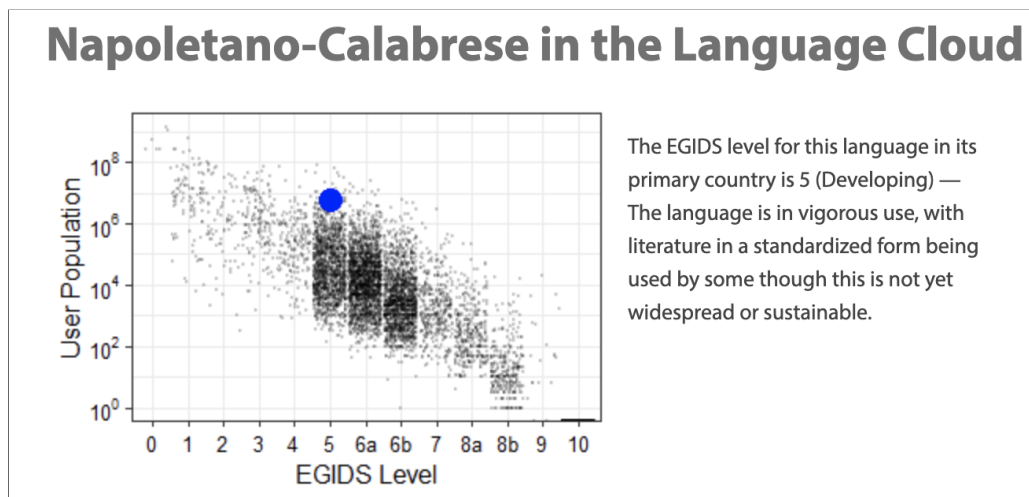


Figure 2

From Eberhard, David M., et al (eds.). “Napoletano-Calabrese Language.” *Ethnologue*

When analyzing the standard Italian language, *Ethnologue* classifies it as a fully developed language with a language status of 1. This status numeral indicates that Italian is a

highly used “National Language” with a large speaker population (Eberhard, et al). This status indicates, “The language is used in education, work, mass media, and government at the national level” (Eberhard et al). There are roughly 59,000,000 total users of the Italian language in Italy, and a total of 67,870,230 users of Italian globally. This is reflected in the Language Cloud figure below (Eberhard et al).

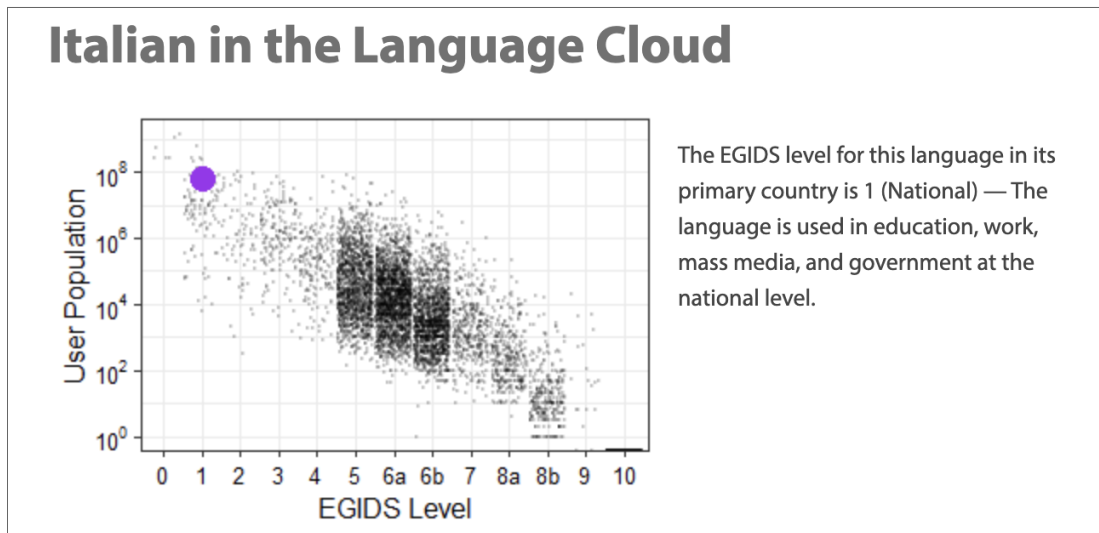


Figure 3

From Eberhard, David M., et al (eds.). “Italian Language.” *Ethnologue*

With regard to the two regional dialects discussed, Sicilian and Neapolitan-Calabrian, it is evident in the findings of the research supported by *Ethnologue* researchers and linguists as of 2021, that both exhibit rather high vitality with upstanding popularity in contemporary Italy. These languages are each used steadily in their respective regions and seem to maintain some level of relevance in terms of use and prevalence in literature and standardized, written texts. For this reason, these two regional dialects are considered to be relatively healthy languages, given their user populations and popularity in their respective regions.

However, when comparing this data with research completed over the past 18-20 years, it is evident that usage of these regional dialects, in domains both inside and outside of the home, is in decline. According to the latest survey by ISTAT entitled, “The use of Italian languages, dialects, and other languages in Italy,” the usage of dialect has steadily decreased over this period while the usage of Italian, the dominating language, has greatly increased. In the study, which ranged from 1995 to 2012, a sample of roughly 54,000 Italians were surveyed. It was discovered that the usage of the Italian national language has increased in the family home from 43.2% to 53.1%, with friends and acquaintances 46.1% to 56.4%, and with strangers from 71.4% to 84.8% (“The use of Italian languages”). Concurrently, the usage of regional dialects has experienced great decline. ISTAT reports that the use of dialect as a principal language has decreased from 23.7% to 9% within the familial domain, from 16.4% to 9% within the friend and social domain, and from 6.3% to 1.8% when speaking with strangers (“The use of Italian languages”).

Coluzzi’s work substantiates this evidence and goes one step further as he indicates possible reasons for this linguistic shift. Coluzzi explains that despite the apparent vitality of the regional dialects of Neapolitan-Calabrian and Sicilian, as seen in the data collected from *Ethnologue*, there is only one language in Italy that remains secure: Italian (Coluzzi 216-219). All other languages or dialects must therefore be considered endangered, especially in light of the rate of decline within the last 18-20 years. This, Coluzzi explains, is a result of “Italianization,” the name given to the phenomenon of the domination of Italian over all other languages in Italy, most notably, the regional dialect languages (Coluzzi 218-219).

Alberto Sobrero describes “Italianization” as follows:

The Italianization of the dialects, as well as the largely symmetrical development of regional varieties of Italian, is part of the complex process of linguistic change

set in motion when different varieties of language or dialect come into close contact with each other within the same linguistic repertory. (Sobrero 1997)

Italianization consists of three phases. The first phase is *diglossia*, which is a linguistic condition wherein two distinct language variations coexist in every social group, each bearing a very specific function in that community. For example, one language, the Italian national language in this case, would be reserved for use in formal or ceremonial settings, while another language, the dialect, would be used in nearly all aspects of life ranging from the home to the market, and various other social settings (Sobrero 412). The usages of the two languages are strictly governed by the context in which users find themselves. Italy has experienced a relatively stable state of diglossia until the beginning of the 21st century.

The second phase is *bilingualism*. Bilingualism describes the phenomenon of the spread and high usage of two languages in one place or community (Sobrero 410-413). Bilingualism can come in two forms: *bilingualism with diglossia* and *bilingualism without diglossia*. In *bilingualism with diglossia*, Italian is used heavily but there still remains a rather clear differentiation in when to use, and when not to use it (Sobrero 412-413). In *bilingualism without diglossia*, both languages, Italian and dialect, are used; however, there is no strict demarcation regarding domains of usage (Sobrero 412-413). The phenomenon of bilingualism, in both of its forms, has arisen out of the industrialization of Italian society. What once housed a primarily pastoral and agriculturally based society, developed into an industrial machine in which commerce, manufacturing and communication on large scales required the usage and knowledge of a common language. This common language is Italian (Sobrero 412).

The third and final stage of Italianization regards the eventual *abandonment of the dialect* (Sobrero 412-414). Once communities are so highly influenced and dependent on the common

language for communication in multiple domains, diglossia and bilingualism are no longer apparent. Instead, the dialect, or subdominant language, is no longer spoken as a result of its ineffectuality and irrelevance to the development of the society in the context of modernization and cross-communications (Sobrero 413).

The effects of each of these phases of Italianization can be observed when referring back to the statistical analysis of the prevalence of dialects, most especially in groups of younger Italians. Coluzzi indicates that of Italians who fall between the ages of 6 and 24, only about 35% speak a form of dialect within their familial domain according to a survey conducted by ISTAT in 2006 (Coluzzi 219). This serves as evidence that dialects are not being passed down through the generations from parent to child or grandparent to grandchild. The lack of intergenerational transmission results in scant percentages of the population maintaining their ability to speak and understand their regional dialect. Coluzzi calculates that this endangerment can lead to eventual extinction within the span of two to three generations, depending upon which dialect is in question (Coluzzi 220). This effectively explains why, although the dialects of Italian selected for this thesis, Neapolitan-Calabrian and Sicilian, appear to be stable and healthy, Italian dialects as a whole are indeed endangered and face extinction in the near future when viewed through a wider perspective and considering the patterns and rates of decline in recent years.

Italian Americans and the Question of Language and Dialect

As this thesis takes into consideration the experiences, opinions, and general role of Italian Americans in this situation of Italian linguistic shift, it is essential to review data regarding this population to better contextualize the demographic in discussion. This will help to better understand the thought processes of Italian Americans as well as the reasons behind many

of their perceptions and observations regarding Italian dialectology, in Italy and the United States, as well as the current climate of linguistic shift in Italy as well as in the United States. First, I analyze population numbers of individuals who claim Italian ancestry and reside in the United States. Then, of this group of Americans who claim Italian ancestry, I report on analytics of speakers of Italian and speakers of Italian dialects in the United States. Finally, I investigate how such speakers in the United States might affect the vitality of the endangered languages or dialects of Italian, even though they reside outside Italy.

As per data gathered by the Italian Embassy of Washington DC, there is an estimate of about 17.3 million Americans of Italian origin currently living in the United States (“Italian and Italian-American Communities / Comites”). This data is substantiated by the United States Census Bureau which reports that as of the 2019 US Census, roughly 16.2 million Americans of Italian origin reside in the United States (“Italian-American Heritage”). The United States Census Bureau also provides information which regard languages spoken in American homes as of 2019 surveys. It was reported that an estimate of 539,546 people speak Italian in their homes. This is a drastic decline from data of previous years (“Italian-American Heritage”). In 2000, it was estimated that 1,008,370 American individuals spoke Italian in the home. Ten years later, this figure decreased to 725,223 in 2010. According to this evidence, the number of people speaking Italian in the home in the United States has decreased by nearly half (“Almost Half Speak a Foreign Language”). This data, however, only reflects the status and vitality of the Italian national language -- not Italian dialects -- in the United States.

The case of the Italian dialect in the United States proves to be much more of a sociolinguistic study rather than one which simply regards numbers and data sets. First a bit of history is necessary to contextualize the arrival of Italian dialects in the United States. During the

first half of the 20th century, waves of Italians sought to leave their home country, otherwise known as *patria*, and immigrate to the United States. It is reported that between 1820 and 2004, roughly 5 million Italians immigrated to the United States (Haller 393-396). The great majority of these individuals hailed from Southern Italian regions, including Sicily, Campania, and Calabria. Many sought to escape the horrible conditions of poverty, famine, economic turmoil, and violence as a result of the First and Second World Wars that befell them during this time (Duggan 207-231). These individuals carried little with them as they made the transatlantic journey; however, their language remained one of the most important and prominent of their belongings.

After settling in the United States, these immigrants continued to use their dialects in nearly every linguistic domain of daily life. Italian immigrants, especially those from the South, began to form ethnic communities in their new American homes, in which the dialect was heavily used and relied upon for communication. Having left Italy prior to the onslaught of Italianization, and thus having no real exposure to standard Italian, these migrants were able to uniquely preserve their dialects, regardless of their origin, as their principal languages (Duggan 207-231). Conversely, standard Italian began to encroach upon the dialect speakers residing in Italy, most especially after the start of the Second World War, during which time standardization of national language was highly prioritized by Mussolini and his government (Duggan 207-231). This was a threat to the vitality of minority dialectal languages in Italy, as well as a strong form of discouragement to preserve a stable level of intergenerational transmission of regional dialects in Italy (Duggan 207-231).

The climate in North America proved different, especially for Southern Italians speaking Southern dialects, including Sicilian, Calabrian, and Neapolitan. Upon arriving in the United

States, ethnic communities grew amongst immigrants and the dialects continued to be heavily spoken as the preferred form of communication. As a result, levels of linguistic vitality of Southern dialects in North America were high, as were levels of intergenerational transmission. Nonetheless, with the passage of time, these reported uses of dialects began to dwindle with each generation as Italians were further removed from the original immigrant generation (Haller 394-397). This is reflected in the aforementioned statistics from the *Center for Immigration Studies* as well as the *United States Census Bureau*. Even if immigrants to the US were able to preserve their language in ways that Italians in Italy might not have been able to, they too began to dismiss the use of dialect in favor of the standard language (English) of their adopted country (Haller 394-397). The discussion of Italian Americans' role in maintaining the use and upkeeping the vitality of Italian dialects is further enhanced by the testimonies and views of the individuals interviewed for this paper.

Interviews

In addition to the scholarly research and published data on the current state of Italian regional dialects, specifically Neapolitan, Calabrian and Sicilian, and their respective speakers in Italy, I have conducted a small and brief survey of my own. My survey aims to gather information concerning Italian speakers, specifically those speakers of these three dialects in the United States of America. My survey addresses the perception of Italian regional dialects, their linguistic vitality, and what endangerment means for the tradition of dialects in general according to the Italian American, specifically, a person from Italy or a person of Italian descent who now resides in the United States of America. My interviews assess the popularity as well as general

opinions surrounding Italian regional dialects in contemporary Italy expressed by those who do not live in Italy.

Eight individuals were specifically selected for inclusion in this small-scale study after having met certain qualifications. Each was required to have some knowledge, understanding, and level of first-hand experience with the Italian language and its usage in Italy, in both its standard and dialectal forms. Each interviewee was also required to have some degree of familiarity with the diversity of regional cultures in Italy, and a general sense of the Italian linguistic history and of how culture and language are intrinsically linked, especially in terms of linguistic shift and endangerment. The interviews took place in English and/or Italian, based on the language preference of the interviewee. However, regardless of their shared knowledge and experience with Italian dialectology, interviewees come from diverse backgrounds and life circumstances, which allots for a varied degree of opinions and general perceptions on certain topics discussed. A brief profile of each interviewee is available in the appendix of this paper, which also contains three selected interviews in their full version.

Table 2.1 details the general demographics of the interviewees. In this table, the interviewees will be labeled by number.

Table 2.1: Categories of Interviewees

	Percentage of Interviewees
Born in Italy (Campania, Calabria, or Sicily)	66.7%
Born in the United States	33.4%
Lived in Italy for an extended period (over six months)	77.8%
Never lived in Italy	33.4%
Studied Abroad in Italy	33.4%
Immigrated to the United States from Italy	66.7%
Descendants of Italian immigrants	33.4%

Table 2.2 provides a general presentation of the results of the survey with respect to a selection of the most important questions asked during the process.

Table 2.2: Results of the Survey

	Agree	Disagree	Agree and disagree	Do not know, did not supply answer
A form of Italian dialect was your first language	100%	0%	0%	0%
You were ridiculed or penalized for speaking a dialect in academic, professional, or social settings	66.7%	0%	33.3%	0%
Regional dialects are positive aspects of Italian regional identity and culture (in your opinion)	88.9%	0%	11.1%	0%
In your experience, Italian dialect is still prevalent and used in contemporary Italy, as it was in the early half of the 20 th century	11.1%	88.9%	0%	0%
Italian dialects will become extinct in the near future (within the next two to three generations)	66.7%	0%	22.3%	11.1%
Regional culture will change in Italy as a result of a possible linguistic shift	55.6%	0%	0%	44.5%

I summarize my findings from these primary sources by providing a brief and general overview of the results of the interview process. The interviews were conducted with eight subjects. Despite having a somewhat diverse sample of subjects, they all shared the criterion of having lived in Italy at some point during their lives for a period of three months or longer. Each

interviewee was asked a series of questions regarding their own individual experiences relating to the ideas of regional dialectology and linguistic shift in contemporary Italy, and how they might contribute to the situation of linguistic shift as dialect speakers in the United States. The questions focused on their first-hand experiences and familiarities with the Italian language in Italy, the Italian regional dialect(s), as well as their opinions regarding the connection, or lack thereof, between the vitality of dialectal languages in Italy and the United States.

In general, those interviewed considered Italian dialects to be deeply personal and familiar pieces of their identity. They viewed the linguistic variants of Italian to be special and important aspects of their culture and what they considered to be the culture of Italy as a *nation*. This is congruent with Fishman's argument that language and culture are mutually dependent upon one another, especially in the context of linguistic shift or attrition ("What Do You Lose When You Lose Your Language"). The interviewees and their fears for the the future of their language are exemplary of Fishman's description of a people in fear of losing a minority language.

In terms of the interviewees' appreciation for the dialects, they were considered in a highly positive light by all interviewees. Many reported that hearing the dialect is something that connects them to their family or community, despite where they live today. It is something that echoes with the essence of their homelands and prompts feelings of nostalgia and reminiscence of what is commonly referred to as "la patria," which is the Italian word referencing one's hometown. This word references not only geographical location, but also a sense of community, which is associated with a sense of pride and fondness for one's homeland. This word was mentioned repeatedly in several interviews and is evidently closely tied to the notion of dialectal languages specific to particular regions and communities.

When asked about the state of the Italian language in today's world, many interviewees admitted that they believed the use of the dialect, no matter which dialect is in question, is indeed dwindling. Most reported that in their experience, children and young generations in Italy have no interest in learning or perpetuating the dialect. This, they say, is due to the national standardization of government and education systems, specifically in the elementary, high school, and university levels. Those interviewed name this post-war effort of language standardization as the direct cause of linguistic change in Italy and, therefore, of a decreased use of and respect for dialectal languages.

Although some interviewees mentioned that they believed there are many positives to national standardization of language, it was certainly evident that nearly all believed this phenomenon to be, in general, inherently negative, sad and troubling. It was clear that the decrease in use of the dialectal languages in Italy, if this is indeed the case, was considered to be a great loss to the nation of Italy and its peoples and their cultures, in spite of their region of origin.

When asked directly whether they believed that linguistic change in Italy will affect the uniqueness of regional identity and culture, there was a great disparity in general opinion. Most replied yes; they believed that the discontinued use of Italian dialects in Italy will directly result in the decline of regional culture and identity. They reported that if the dialect ceases to be used and thus falls to extinction, "all old-world traditions and culture will fall by the wayside," to use the words of one interviewee. Contrary to this belief, others replied no to this question; they thought that language need not, and in some cases *ought* not to constitute the uniqueness and individuality of a culture regardless of the culture in question.

Below are sample questions asked during each interview, for further reference:

- Please state and spell your name. Where are you from? Where/when were you born?
What was your first language?
- If your first language was a dialect of Italian, when did you realize that it was indeed a dialect, different to that of “official” Italian?
- What does the dialect mean to you? Do you have a preference of conversing in the dialect or “official” Italian?
- Do you think the dialect is still prevalent or popular in Italy? In your experience, is the dialect as prevalent as it was in the early half of the 20th century?
- Were you ever penalized for speaking the dialect, whether it be in an academic, professional, or social setting? How did this make you feel? Did it change your opinion about the dialect?
- Do you think that in the future people might stop speaking the dialect? Would this be a negative thing or a positive thing?
- How do you describe your position as an American speaker of Italian dialects?
- Do you think you have a responsibility to continue to speak the language in the United States? Or to pass it on to future generations?

V. Discussion and Conclusion

The Italian language has an immensely rich and complex history: one that spans centuries and bears witness to the development of multitudes of cultures, both within and outside the geographical boundaries of the peninsula. Throughout the history of Italy, spanning from the earliest presence of the peoples of Etruria in the North, to the influx of Grecian people in the South, to the rise and fall of the Roman Empire, the development of regional kingdoms and feudal societies during the European Renaissance, and finally leading up to the pre- and post-World Wars in Europe, language has been a constantly fluctuating yet highly important aspect of cultural life in Italy. However, despite the ever-present importance of language for the development of a national identity, the level of linguistic change and evolution that Italian languages have undergone during the aforementioned time periods is substantial.

This thesis addresses this change; specifically, it addresses how understanding language usages and the dialectic between national and regional dialects remain pertinent to Italian dialect speakers in Italy as well as speakers of Italian dialects in the United States in the modern day. The review of relevant literature and data on the subject explicitly defines this linguistic evolution and the subsequent levels of endangerment and survival of Southern Italian dialectal languages in the selected regions of Italy and the United States. This evolution, endangerment and survival are examined through consideration of three regions and their dialects (Neapolitan-Calabrian and Sicilian), as well as Italian American speakers of Italian and/or one of these dialects in the United States. A thorough overview of linguistic theory, in terms of language vitality and linguistic endangerment, as well as a review of the history of Italian language and dialect are provided.

The case studies of this thesis include thorough analyses of the topics of language endangerment, Italian language and dialectology in contemporary Italy, the endangerment of Italian dialects, the role of the Italian American in the dynamic of linguistic shift, and finally the interview aspect of my research. Together, these aspects of my research demonstrate that indeed, Italian dialectal languages are in decline. This is true in the cases of the aforementioned regions in Italy, as well as in the United States.

Dialect endangerment is caused by two main factors: 1) Italianization, and subsequently 2) interruption, or loss, of intergenerational transmission of dialectal languages from parent to child. This is overtly indicated by the data analyses of speaker populations of Italian and regional dialects in Italy, as well as in the United States. Each set of data, those acquired from *Ethnologue*, ISTAT, *Ambasciata d'Italia Washington*, and the *Center for Immigration Studies* illustrates a clear decline in the usages of regional dialects, especially in their native Italy.

This leads to the discussion of the role of Italian Americans in the complex dynamic of linguistic shift. The case studies, both of the vitality of the dialects in Italy and the interview process, presented in this section deal with the prevalence of Italian spoken in the domestic domain, i.e., at home, with family, with friends, etc., living in the United States. Data reports detail that the vitality of Italian language is in decline in this domain and suggests that intergenerational transmission is decreasing with each passing generation.

Finally, in the last section of my case studies, I present a summarized version of the data gathered from a small-scale survey that I conducted myself. This survey concerns the perceptions, experiences, and opinions that Italian American dialect speakers have regarding the dialect itself in general as well as the notion of its decline and imminent endangerment. This data

provided for an excellent source of first-hand information to complement the statistical and literature data.

The key components of my thesis consist of data regarding the vitality of the languages selected, a look at the firsthand experiences of members of speaker populations, and finally, a consideration of how speakers of dialects in the United States might affect the current situation of Italian dialects and their vitality. Specifically, the most important data and most influential variables on the current dialect vitality in Italy and the United States regard the current vitality of standard Italian and dialects in the Italian American dialect speaking population in the United States, and the results of the small-scale interview study.

My findings substantiate my original expectations prior to conducting in depth research and engaging with my case studies. My original expectation was that Italian dialects are in severe decline and are currently not in use as primary languages in contemporary Italy. I surmised that Italianization had taken hold of the linguistic situation in Italy and has resulted in a great gap in intergenerational transmission. Thus, I expected this to cause the near extinction of any regional dialects, specifically in Campania, Calabria, and Sicily. Similarly, I expected to discover that the vitality of standard Italian, as well as of regional dialects, were dwindling in the United States with each generation further removed from the original Italian immigrant.

Especially regarding linguistic shift and Italianization (in its three phases: diglossia, bilingualism (with and without diglossia), and abandonment of the dialect), evidence has proved that this has taken effect in Italy. The extent to which language loss has occurred, however, is not as grave as originally expected, especially in older population segments. Nonetheless, the rates of decline of dialect usage in the regions studied are severe enough to be cause for concern regarding their continued usage and transmission to younger generations. Similarly, in terms of

data gathered regarding the usage of standard Italian and Italian dialects in the United States, rates of usage are dwindling as rates of decline continue to increase with each generation.

My final analysis supports the existing research on each of the topics addressed. As presented by each of the scholars discussed in the body of this thesis paper, I concur that the phenomenon of Italianization in Italy, and severe lack of intergenerational transmission in the United States has caused for the vitality of these languages to be subjects of grave concern. Solely based on numerical data and patterns, it is clear that linguistic shift has taken effect and will change the linguistic situation of Italy in a matter of generations. However, through a deeper analysis on the perspectives and experiences of Italian American speakers of Italian dialects, it can be plausible that Italian dialect speakers abroad could potentially affect the vitalities of these dialectal languages through their continued usage.

VI. Appendix

Selected Interviews

1. Interviewee #6: Maria F.

Juliana E. (Interviewer): Good morning Maria! How are you today?

Maria F (Interviewee): Hi Juliana, I'm doing fine today. How about you?

Juliana: I'm doing well! Before we begin, I wanted to thank you so much for agreeing to interview with me and take part in my thesis project and research. This really means a lot to me.

Maria: I am so honored and happy to be a part of it. You know, I am so proud of my background and my ancestors that anything that might pay homage to them and where they came from - where I came from - brings me such joy and honor. Thank you, Juliana, for asking me to join you today and for doing this project at all. It's really wonderful.

Juliana: Thank you, Maria, I appreciate it. I agree with you, paying homage to our ancestors and our homelands is a very profound and special thing.

Maria: Yes, indeed.

Juliana: Let's just dive right into my questions, then. First, where are you from, originally? When and where were you born?

Maria: I am originally from a small, very old village called Nocera Terinese. It is located in the province of Catanzaro, in the region of Calabria in South Italy. I was born in 1955, in my family home, and am the second of three children in my family.

Juliana: Thank you. Can you describe your experiences with languages growing up and living in Italy? Specifically Italian dialects?

Maria: Sure. I grew up in Catanzaro, so my first language was Calabrese. In school, particularly middle school, I learned to read, write, and speak standard Italian. As I grew up I used both

languages, but mostly Calabrese since I lived with my family and never really ventured much outside the region. Then I moved to America in 1978, when I was thirteen years old. I was thrown another linguistic curveball and had to learn English. By the end of high school I learned to read, write and speak English fluently. Later, after college, I married my husband, who was originally from Sicily. We married and moved to his hometown of Cefalù, where I worked in a middle school teaching English language classes. Again, I was struck with another curveball. It shocked me that nearly no one there could speak standard Italian. Everybody spoke the dialect, children, adults, elderly, even if they knew you could not understand them. And so, I had to learn my husband's dialect. It took some time, and caused much frustration, but I did it. I learned to understand it fully, and even speak some of it.

Juliana: What was it like to learn Sicilian, a dialect different from your native dialect? How did this experience differ from learning standard Italian or even English?

Maria: I found it exceptionally more difficult. Even as someone who studied multiple languages, it was still quite hard to grasp and recall Sicilian. There is no textbook, no workbook exercises, and no classes available that teach Sicilian as there are for standard Italian and English. I had to learn through trial and error, through experience. That was about all I had. I did it though!

Juliana: That's really amazing. I can definitely see how difficult learning a dialect like Sicilian could be, especially if only through first hand experience. That is quite an achievement. I have a few follow up questions. With regard to Calabrian and your upbringing, where did you speak this language? Was it acceptable in all aspects, or domains, of life in Nocera?

Maria: We spoke it everywhere, at home, at the stores, in the bars and cafes, etc. Everywhere, except in school, that is. Our teachers were also from Nocera and were brought up speaking the Calabrian dialect, but learning standard Italian was still a part of our school curriculum.

Juliana: When did you realize that the Calabrian dialect was in fact different from standard Italian? What perceptions did you have about this difference?

Maria: In school. Sometimes, while writing papers especially, I would write a word in dialect, but my teachers would scold me and subtract points. They would tell me to try again and make sure I use the correct word on the next try. It was at this time that I began to associate standard Italian with something right, and good, and dialect with something that was wrong, or bad.

Juliana: Was this something that you struggled with as someone who grew up speaking only Calabrian dialect?

Maria: Oh yes. Dialect was the only language my parents spoke! How was I to know how to speak “real” Italian let alone write an essay in it! Also, being told or made to understand that your mother tongue is not necessarily the correct language, gave me a complex, of sorts, as I grew up, especially as I was old enough to understand that dialects were considered to be uneducated or unenlightened forms of communication.

Juliana: Did your friends and classmates struggle in the same ways that you did?

Maria: Yes. I think for the most part we were all pretty much on the same page when it came to having difficulty with the dialect and learning standard Italian. But, by the end of school, we were all more or less conversant in the standard form. We could read it, write it, and definitely speak it. This proved very useful and helpful when traveling outside Calabria, or in the context of higher education or when applying for jobs in the professional world.

Juliana: After you moved to America at age thirteen, did you continue to speak the Calabrese dialect, or standard Italian?

Maria: Yes, I did. We continued to speak the dialect in my home with my family and relatives. Also, because many people who immigrated to where I lived in the US were also from Calabria,

I found myself using it socially as well - in certain stores, certain neighborhoods, with certain friends, etc. I used standard Italian as well, but that was in more formal or unfamiliar situations... like if I was speaking to a friend of a friend who did not know Calabrese but was from another part of Italy.

Juliana: Which would you say you used more of once in America: standard Italian, or Calabrian dialect?

Maria: I would say the dialect. This was because, as I mentioned, many of the people I would speak in Italian to, were in fact from Calabria. So it was comfortable for both parties to simply use Calabrian.

Juliana: Did you ever find yourself employing your knowledge of Sicilian in the United States after having moved back to America?

Maria: The only times I would use Sicilian in the United States was with members of my husband's family who moved here as well. Other than that, my family and community did not include very many people from Sicily.

Juliana: How do you describe your position as an American speaker of Italian dialects?

Maria: I think being an American speaker of Italian dialects is a very interesting and unique position to find yourself in. As time goes on, I feel that the prevalence of the dialect is becoming less and less in Italy compared to, let's say, forty years ago when I was a teacher in Cefalù. After visiting multiple times since we've moved back, it definitely appears that more and more children speak to their parents in standard Italian rather than dialect. Although parents probably are familiar with or speak their dialects, children are educated and brought up in a world where dialects serve no real purpose other than familial or historical importance. In America, I think that for many immigrants like myself, at least those in my age group and demographic, the

dialect is the first language that comes to mind when we reference or speak to our friends, family, and relatives. We do not immediately use standard Italian. In contemporary Italy, however, I think much has changed. People typically tend to speak standard Italian rather than their original dialect. For this reason, sometimes I feel that the Italians who immigrated to the United States have preserved their dialects in ways that Italians in Italy have not. We, in a sense, have the opportunity to safeguard it as a language separate from the national language. As a result, it is kept safe and preserved from outside influences whereas in Italy, the dialect and the national language are so similar that they melt into one and morph overtime.

Juliana: Do you think that in the future people might stop speaking their dialect in Italy? Would this be a negative thing or a positive thing?

Maria: I think that unfortunately, it has already occurred. I do not know detailed specifics or data sets on this information, however I think that the implementation of standard Italian has influenced the linguistic climate of Italy so much that not many parents are trying to keep the dialect alive. They are complacent with the dominance of standard Italian and have no remorse or regret. I find it sad.

Juliana: What about in the United States? Do you think you have a responsibility to continue to speak the language in the US? Or to pass it on to future generations?

Maria: I think that with every generation that passes, the familiarity with dialect dwindles...as with any tradition or old custom. But, yes, I think I do. As a lover of languages, especially the language of my ancestors and my patria, I definitely believe that I have an obligation to continue to speak my Calabrian dialect. My children have learned it - it was their first language - and I currently speak to my grandchildren in my dialect as well. They answer me in English, but they can still understand.

Juliana: Lastly, as you grew up, what were some of your fondest memories of Nocera Terinese?

What do you remember about the village and the people there?

Maria: I have countless beautiful memories - with my family and friends, outdoors, in school - there are too many to list. However, one memory I can detail is how I felt when I was home. I remember always feeling like I was surrounded by family, or at least a familiar sense of community. Everybody knew each other and each other's families. This was something that I didn't encounter after immigrating to America. It took time to get used to the diversity and unfamiliarity of typical American towns and cities, especially big cities like New York or Manhattan.

Juliana: Do you think that language had anything to do with the sense of familiarity that you felt in Nocera? If so, how?

Maria: For sure, for sure. Everybody spoke the same language. We spoke "u dialetto". In the village, we even called it "Nocerese". That was a dialect particular to our village, our neighborhoods, our families, and our homes. It was something that bonded us with one another and created a sense of belonging.

Juliana: That's a lovely sentiment Maria, thank you. Once again thank you so much for interviewing today, I enjoyed our conversation!

Maria: Thank you so much it was a pleasure!

F., Maria. Personal interview. 30 September 2021.

2. Interviewee #2: Federico S.

Juliana E. (Interviewer): Good afternoon, Federico! How do you feel today?

Federico S. (Interviewee): Hi Juliana. I feel good today. It's so nice to see you.

Juliana: You too! I am glad we found a chance to sit and talk about my project! Thank you so much for interviewing with me and taking part in my thesis project and research. It really means a lot to me.

Federico: Of course, I am so happy to. I hope I can be of some use to you.

Juliana: I think you definitely will. We can begin with my first couple questions. Where are you from, originally? When and where were you born?

Federico: I am originally from la Provincia di Catanzaro, in Calabria. I was born in my hometown, Nocera Terinese, in 1931. This was right before the war started.

Juliana: Can you describe your family as a bit of background? For example, do you have any siblings?

Federico: Yes, I have two younger half-siblings. My sister, Angelina is four years younger than me, and my little brother, Giuseppe, was five years younger than me. Giuseppe passed away when he was only five years old - he had pneumonia. The three of us share the same mother but have different fathers. My father died of tuberculosis when he was twenty-nine years old. I think I was eighteen months old at that time. A couple years later, Mamma remarried and had two more children, Angelina and Giuseppe. Sadly, her new husband died once the war began. He was captured and died in a prisoner of war camp. At this time, there was so much sadness. C'era così tanta violenza, morte, angoscia... era un tempo veramente terribile.

Juliana: Sì, lo so. I am so very sorry.

Federico: Thank you.

Juliana: Can you tell me a bit about your experience with the Italian language and dialect? We can talk about Italy first and then move on to the United States, if you'd like.

Federico: Sure. Well, like I told you before, I was born in Calabria in 1931. At that time, everybody spoke the dialect. Nobody really spoke "real Italian" unless you were "educato o un dottore" [highly educated or a professional]. Since most people in the village were farmers or workers in the mountains, we only spoke the dialect.

Juliana: What about in school?

Federico: I only went to the fifth grade. This was an accomplishment in the village. Especially for a fatherless boy who lived and worked on a farm. Most of the kids only went to third grade, especially if you were a girl. School wasn't the most important thing for us at the time.

Juliana: That is very interesting. I am sure the war didn't help this issue.

Federico: The war made it much worse. We were hungry and sick. We needed food and medicine. So, the kids went to work as soon as they could, even if we were only ten or eleven years old. But in the little bit of school I did have, the teachers would always try to speak Italiano ufficiale. I think this had something to do with Mussolini taking power and making it mandatory to speak real Italian no matter where you came from or what language your mother or father taught you.

Juliana: Did you learn standard Italian in school?

Federico: They [the teachers] spoke it to us but it was hard to really understand it in that place...even though they told us it was mandatory. I learned it more after leaving school and working...even in America I feel like I spoke it more than when I was in Calabria.

Juliana: When did you realize that the Calabrian dialect was different from standard Italian?

Federico: In school. Definitely in school. I would hear it on the radio but that felt different to me. The people on the radio weren't talking to me. In school, they wanted me to speak back in real Italian. It was more personal and apparent to me in this way.

Juliana: When did you leave Italy to immigrate to America?

Federico: I left Italy in October 1952 and got to New York in November. I was twenty-one years old. I spent almost twenty-two days on a ship across the Atlantic. It was called the *Contebiancamano*. I think it was a retired military ship for the Italian navy. It was very run down. I think about it now and think, "How crazy we must've been." But then I remember how desperate we were. For freedom, for mobility.

Juliana: Once you arrived in America, what language did you speak? With your family, with your friends, etc.?

Federico: I spoke mostly dialect, some Italiano ufficiale, and then I had to learn English. I worked in a factory so I would practice my English with the guys working next to me who were also from Italy. I spoke Calabrese with my family, and with my friends from Calabria. With friends who were also Italian but not Calabrese, I would try to practice my real Italian.

Juliana: Currently, which language, among English, Italian, and Calabrian, do you speak the most of?

Federico: I mostly speak Calabrese. Although I am fluent in English and have done pretty well with standard Italian.

Juliana: In your experience, is the dialect still spoken as it was when you were younger and living in Italy? Do you think that in the future people might stop speaking the dialect? In Italy, or in the United States?

Federico: That is a hard question. I think that there are less people that speak the dialects in Italy

than when I lived there between 1931 and 1952. I would travel home every few years and I noticed that more and more young people speak real Italian than the dialect of their parents and grandparents. It is very hard for me to imagine that the whole dialect could just disappear one day, but I guess, after enough years pass and no one speaks the language, it could very well stop being used.

Juliana: What do you think about this? How does this make you feel?

Federico: I think this is very troubling. I would be sad if this happened. I think the dialects are pieces of who we are, pieces of our history. For them to be gone would be like taking away a piece of our ancestry.

Juliana: Why do you think this is happening or could potentially happen in the future?

Federico: I think that with years passing, the dialect became *antiquato*. It's old. Nobody uses it because they don't need it anymore. I think that today, especially with everybody being on the computer, and more young people going to college than when I was young, it is just easier to use this language. It is the language used in all of these places, school, on the computers, at work, that just makes more sense I suppose.

Juliana: What is it like to be a speaker of Italian dialect in America? Especially in contemporary times when the dialects are less prevalent than in years prior?

Federico: I think it is very interesting. I feel like I have held onto a piece of the past, like a treasure. I think myself and others from my generation are probably some of the last to hold onto this piece of history. I think it is important that myself and people like me keep speaking the language and passing it on to our kids and grandkids. I think that is so important. It is important for our culture, our way of life, our family life and traditions.

Juliana: That is a very eloquent way to express your thoughts. I definitely agree with you.

Federico: Thank you very much.

Juliana: Of course. Unless there might be anything else you wish to add, I think that concludes this interview! Thank you so much for your time and help.

Federico: Sure thank you. Good luck!

S., Federico. Personal interview. 2 September 2021.

Profiles of Interviewees

1. Interviewee: Teresa E.

Teresa E. was born in New Jersey, United States of America in 1962 to immigrant parents from Calabria, Italy. Growing up, her first language was the Calabrian dialect. It was the only language spoken at home. She learned English when she began school at age five. Later, during her late teens and early twenties, she began to travel to Italy for periods of three to four months at a time during which, through the aid of her contemporaries, she learned to speak, read, and write standard Italian. She currently resides in the United States and speaks the Calabrian dialect, standard Italian, and English fluently.

2. Interviewee: Federico S.

Federico S. was born in the province of Catanzaro, Calabria, Italy in 1931. He grew up in Catanzaro during the Second World War and reached adolescence in the postwar period. Federico's first language was the Calabrian dialect. He immigrated to the United States in 1952, where he became proficient in standard Italian through communicating with Italian patrons of his

business, as well as English. He currently resides in the United States and his primary language is the Calabrian dialect. He is proficient in standard Italian and fluent in English.

3. Interviewee: Filicino S.

Filicino S. was born in the province of Salerno, Campania Italy in 1946. He grew up in Salerno during the postwar period. Filicino's first language was the Neapolitan dialect. He learned standard Italian at an elementary level while in primary school, beginning at the age of six until age twelve. He immigrated to the United States in 1959 at the age of thirteen and continued his education in English until the age of sixteen. He currently resides in the United States and speaks the Neapolitan dialect as his primary language. He is also fluent in English as well as standard Italian.

4. Interviewee: Rachele T.

Rachele T. was born in the province of Naples, Campania, Italy in 1963. She grew up in Naples and received her primary education in Italy prior to immigrating to the United States in 1973 at the age of ten. Growing up, her first language was the Neapolitan dialect. In elementary and middle school in Italy, the primary language of instruction was standard Italian, with some Neapolitan influences. After immigrating to the United States however, she was educated in English. She currently resides in the United States and speaks English, the Neapolitan dialect and standard Italian fluently.

5. Interviewee: Ada G.

Ada G. was born in the province of Catanzaro, Calabria, Italy in 1962. She grew up in Catanzaro and received her primary education in Italy prior to immigrating to the United States in 1971 at the age of nine. Growing up, her first language was the Calabrian dialect. In elementary and middle school in Italy, the primary language of instruction was standard Italian. After immigrating to the United States however, she was educated in English. After high school, she attended New York University where she studied Romance Languages and Linguistics. Following college, she spent time traveling throughout Italy working professionally in Italian corporate offices. She currently resides in the United States and speaks the Calabrian dialect, standard Italian, English, Spanish, and French fluently.

6. Interviewee: Maria F.

Maria F. was born in the province of Catanzaro, Calabria, Italy in 1955. She grew up in Catanzaro and received her primary education in Italy prior to immigrating to the United States in 1978 at the age of thirteen. Growing up, her first language was the Calabrian dialect. In elementary and middle school in Italy, the primary language of instruction was standard Italian. After immigrating to the United States however, she was educated in English. After high school, she attended Seton Hall University where she studied Italian Languages and Literature, and Education. Subsequently, she moved back to Italy, specifically Cefalù, Sicily, where she lived for fifteen years and worked as an English teacher in a high school. Following her retirement, she moved back to the United States. She currently resides in the United States and speaks the Calabrian dialect, standard Italian, and English fluently, and is proficient in the Sicilian dialect.

7. Interviewee: Sara F.

Sara F. was born in New York, United States of America in 1973 to immigrant parents from Naples, Campania Italy. Growing up, her first language was the Neapolitan dialect. It was the only language spoken at home. She learned English when she began school at age six. Later, during her late teens and early twenties, she began to travel to Italy each summer, during which she was exposed to standard Italian. She currently resides in the United States and speaks the Neapolitan dialect and English fluently, and is minimally proficient in standard Italian.

8. Interviewee: Cesare S.

Cesare S. was born in New York, United States of America in 1956 to immigrant parents from Catanzaro, Calabria Italy. Growing up, his first language was the Calabrian dialect. It was the only language spoken at home. He learned English when he began school at age five. Later, during his late teens and early twenties, he studied abroad in Italy, during which he began to expose himself to standard Italian in academic settings. He currently resides in the United States and speaks the Calabrian dialect, English, and standard Italian fluently.

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