

Heritage nation vs heritage language: Towards a more nuanced rhetoric of 'heritage' in Italian language pedagogy

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Abstract

Language programs in the US frequently invoke the notion of *heritage* in order to spark student interest in language learning. The idea is that acquisition of a particular language can connect a student to their past in ways that can empower them and give them a richer appreciation of their own ethnic background. This article addresses this 'appeal to heritage' approach to the promotion of language learning, in relation to Italian. I discuss the disconnect between the language of the classroom on the one hand and true Italian-American linguistic heritage on the other. My purpose is to facilitate an informed discussion of linguistic reality, which is that many members of the Italian diaspora descend from ancestors who were monolingual *dialettofoli*. I argue that the facts of linguistic diversity in Italy and dialect heritage in the US should be central to any discourse which aims to promote the learning of Italian as a gateway to our students' pasts. While there is no question that knowledge of Standard Italian gives access to Italy, which in turn can give access to the Italian-American student's heritage culture(s), it is necessary to formulate a more precise understanding of the link between 'knowledge of Italian' on the one hand, and 'Italian heritage' on the other – a link which is much less direct than is often suggested.

Keywords

heritage, Italian dialect, linguistics, linguistic hegemony, pedagogy

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Introduction

There are many different ways language pedagogues and directors of language programs in the USA promote the learning of languages other than English. Learning another language broadens our capacity for conceptualizing the world around us, it gives us the opportunity to gain a much deeper understanding of other cultures, and it can give us access to lucrative job opportunities. For many languages (like for example Spanish, Italian, or Chinese), it has become popular amongst pedagogues to try to attract students to the language classroom also by appealing to the idea of *heritage*: learning a particular language can connect students to their past in ways that can empower them and give them a richer appreciation of their own ethnic backgrounds. Let us refer to this as the ‘appeal to heritage’ argument.

If we further consider what this means specifically, however, we immediately see how the ‘appeal to heritage’ argument can become problematic. This might be clearest in the case of Mandarin Chinese, if we consider students whose families originally emigrated from, say, the Guangdong (Cantonese-speaking) province of China. Despite the fact that some students with a Cantonese background might in fact self-identify as ‘Chinese-American’ – for example in a Census questionnaire (possibly because ‘Chinese’ is the closest choice provided, in a list of ethnicities), it is quite plainly inaccurate to claim that the Mandarin Chinese of the language classroom represents the heritage language of a student with a Cantonese background. While the Chinese case might seem to be the most clear-cut, I claim that this problem actually arises wherever the ‘appeal to heritage’ argument is used. In this spirit, the aim of this article is to critically evaluate the ‘appeal to heritage’ argument, in the context of Italian language pedagogy.

Because Italy is like any other nation-state which uses socio-economic and cultural privilege as a way to promote one particular dialect as the national standard language, Italian-Americans have little or no access to formal instruction of the non-standard languages spoken by their ancestors. Even the very fact that our ancestors spoke linguistic varieties other than the Standard – the so-called ‘Italian dialects’ – is barely a part of the American public and pedagogical discourse on Italian language instruction. As a result, the teaching and learning of Standard Italian is robustly promoted as the (only) linguistic way for members of the Italian diaspora to connect with their heritage – this despite the fact that most Italian-Americans’ ancestors never spoke Italian, certainly not as a first language. In fact, given the historic lack of educational opportunities in Italy for many Italian emigrants (especially those who left Italy before the Second World War), many never even spoke it as a second language either; rather, many members of the diaspora descend from ancestors who were what Italian dialectologists call monolingual *dialetofon* (‘dialectophones’).

My aim here is to help facilitate an informed discussion of this reality, and how it might affect our discourse, as we promote the learning of Italian as a gateway to our students’ pasts. While there is no question that knowledge of Standard Italian gives access to Italy, which in turn can give access to an Italian-American student’s heritage culture(s), it is necessary to formulate a more precise understanding of the link

between ‘knowledge of Italian’ on the one hand and ‘Italian heritage’ on the other – a link which is much less direct than is often suggested. I argue that the question of developing an informed and more finely-grained understanding has at stake the success of Italian-American students in their pursuit of Italian language learning, the very thing that we claim we wish to foster, when using the ‘appeal to heritage’ argument.

1. Italian and Italian dialects: A very brief overview

I would like to begin by reviewing what the terms ‘Italian’ and ‘Italian dialect’ have come to mean, at least in certain contexts.¹ Of course, for space reasons I cannot take this opportunity to give a full history of the Romance languages, how they came to be, and why certain Romance varieties were established as national standards while others were relegated to the status of unofficial dialects. Nevertheless, for the purpose of clarity of the overarching argument in this article, we can at least go over some basic linguistic and historical facts.

As is well-known, all Romance languages descend from Vulgar Latin, which, in contrast with Classical Latin, was the actual language spoken by the people of the Roman Empire. Actually, Vulgar Latin itself was not one monolithic language; rather, from the very beginning it exhibited a robust socially and geographically conditioned variation within the Roman world. This variation in the forms which Vulgar Latin took arguably resulted in part from the fact that the pre-Roman peoples spoke a variety of different, and in some cases unrelated, languages (such as Oscan, Umbran, Celtic, and Etruscan). When these people acquired the language of the Romans, their native languages exerted unique influences on their own new versions of the Latin language. As such, it would be most accurate to say that the modern Romance languages developed not from Vulgar Latin, but rather from *different varieties* of Vulgar Latin. The case of Romance serves as an excellent example of how remarkably language can change over a relatively short period of time: if we look at ‘Latin Europe’ today (that is, the area of the continent that Italian dialectologists call *România*), and avoid thinking of Europe in political, ‘nation-state’ terms, what we find is that these Vulgar Latin varieties developed and differentiated into literally hundreds of different languages.

Perhaps it might seem strange to claim that there are literally hundreds of different Romance languages spoken today, especially since if you look at any popular literature on the European languages you in fact usually find the claim that the Romance languages number somewhere around five or six, with Spanish, Italian, French, Portuguese, Romanian, and perhaps Catalan being the ones worth listing (though slightly more sophisticated popular sources might also include Occitan, Sardinian, and Romansch). But these estimates are driven by an understanding of Europe purely in nationalistic and/or political terms: whether you claim that there are six, nine, or 600 Romance languages depends on whether you understand the term ‘language’ politically and whether you want the nation-state (loosely defined; cf. Catalonia) to be the definer of what a language is, or whether you understand it in

purely linguistic terms. And since the question of the so-called 'Italian dialects' – which are rarely referred to as languages – is at the core of the present discussion, I would like to discuss the notion of language vs dialect just for a moment, before we get into the specifics of Italian and the Italian dialects themselves.

The term 'language,' especially when used in relation to the term 'dialect,' can be highly problematic from the point of view of the linguist, who is interested in purely structural, linguistic questions; this is because the terms 'language' and 'dialect' have no linguistic import; rather, they are political terms, and as such are commonly used by non-linguists in highly politicized ways. On the more innocuous side, people generally think of languages as those linguistic varieties that are officially sanctioned as the Standard of some nation-state. For example, Norwegian and Swedish are commonly taken to be separate languages, an unsurprising fact given that Norway and Sweden are two different countries. On the flip side, Shanghainese and Cantonese are commonly taken to be 'dialects' of Chinese, but again this is not surprising from the political viewpoint given that both are spoken within the borders of the political entity known as China. These linguistic classifications are popularly accepted, despite the fact that speakers of Norwegian and Swedish report that they understand one another quite easily, while speakers of Shanghainese and Cantonese report that their so-called 'dialects' are not easily mutually comprehensible. These examples thus reveal that use of the terms 'language' and 'dialect' is driven by political considerations, rather than linguistic ones. A linguistic consideration might for example be whether or not speakers of the varieties in question can easily understand one another's speech.

In and of itself, this fact might seem rather harmless, but unfortunately this robust popular use of the term 'language' tends to confer in people's minds some kind of special linguistic status on those varieties that we call 'languages.' Likewise, we end up conferring on those varieties that we call 'dialects' some kind of imagined linguistic inferiority. It is interesting in this regard to note that Spanish-speaking Mexicans generally refer to Nahuatl, a major Native American language which is currently spoken by at least 1.5 million people in Mexico, as a 'dialect.' Since Nahuatl, a Uto-Aztecan language, is certainly not a dialect of Spanish (which is an Indo-European language), the label 'dialect' in relation to Nahuatl must reflect the desire to relegate this major language to inferior status with respect to Spanish. Note that to avoid the non-linguistically driven connotations of the terms 'language' and 'dialect,' linguists often use the term 'linguistic variety' for both; so in linguistic terms both Mandarin and Shanghainese (like both Norwegian and Swedish) are considered linguistic varieties.

The term 'Italian dialect' is thus highly unfortunate, inasmuch as it seems to incorrectly suggest that the Italian dialects are either mere derivatives of Standard Italian (at best), and/or that they are linguistically inferior (at worst). From the non-political, purely scientific, linguistic view, Italian dialects are really full-fledged linguistic varieties in their own right, just like Italian. As such we have to be careful not to let the term 'dialect' mislead us into concluding that the so-called Italian dialects are linguistically inferior, or that they derive from the Italian language. Romance

linguists have scientifically shown that the group of languages we refer to as Italian dialects includes Italian, and that like Italian (and like the other Romance languages) they evolved from Vulgar Latin. Standard Italian is thus not the ‘mother’ of the other Italian dialects, but rather, more like a charmed sister who, for a series of cultural and political reasons, was elevated to the status of a literary and then a national standard. Had historical circumstances been different, the language being taught in the schools today might be Neapolitan or some standardized variety of Sicilian. It is a well-known fact that the fortunes of a language can change over time, so that yesterday’s disowned step-child can become today’s prodigal son, and vice versa. Consider in this regard the case of Occitan (or Provençal), which in the Middle Ages was regarded by Europeans as *the* linguistic variety to emulate; so much so, in fact, that Portuguese grammarians on the other side of the Pyrenees used the orthographic system of this Southern French language as a model when devising a writing system for their own language. Today, however, Occitan is hardly recognized as a language at all and is so devalued that the number of native speakers is diminishing with each passing generation.

To return to Standard Italian, we should note that the idea that it is a simple sister of other Italian dialects is not entirely accurate. Italian is really more like a sister that had numerous blood-transfusions and organ transplants from its siblings during its development and evolution. While it is true that the language used by Dante in the 1300s served as the basis of what is today known as Standard Italian, the language Dante chose to write in, and encouraged other authors to use, was not the Florentine dialect, contrary to what is commonly assumed. Rather, he wrote in what was arguably a *koiné* (Benincà, 1996), which is, roughly speaking, a dialect that develops as the result of contact amongst closely related dialects; this *koiné* – already in use throughout Italy by the time Dante came on the scene – had a robust Tuscan base but was influenced by other varieties, such as Sicilian.² As Migliorini and Griffith (1966: 84), for example, note:

The lyric poets of the Sicilian school were the first group [in the 13th century] to produce a body of poetry of a serious artistic nature in the vulgar tongue and the first to succeed in forging a poetic language that could serve as the model for other Italian versifiers Certain features of this poetic language thus became permanent characteristics of the Italian poetic tradition.

Thus, Sicilian influenced the ultimate character of the linguistic variety that would eventually be sanctioned as the national standard, a fact which should give us pause when we are tempted to repeat the claim that ‘Italian is the dialect of 14th century Florence.’

2. The Italian people’s language

Despite the final and inevitable establishment of Italian as the official language of Italy at the time of Unification, the Italian dialects continued to thrive as the primary

languages of the Italian people. There are literally hundreds of Italian dialects spoken in Italy today; consider the fact that a recent study of the grammar of subject pronouns (Poletto, 2000), which was limited just to a subset of Northern Italian dialects (spoken in the Veneto, Friuli, Lombard, and Piedmontese regions), cites over 100 varieties alone. And if you take a look at the dialect map in Figure 1 you can see that Italy divides, loosely speaking, into two major language families.

The light gray shaded area in the top third of the map represents the ‘Gallo-Italic’ family of languages, which itself is related to the Western Romance languages (like Provençal and Catalan); everything to the south of that area belongs to the Central-Southern group of dialects. In fact, the line dividing this area from the slightly darker gray area (and everything below that), the so-called ‘La Spezia-Rimini line’, represents the great divide between Western Romance and Eastern and Southern Romance. Given these facts, we can say that many Italian dialects do not even



Figure 1. Linguistic map of Italy.

belong to the same sub-family of languages that Standard Italian belongs to. The language we call ‘Italian’ belongs to the Central-Southern group of dialects, so it is less related to the Northern dialects and more related to the Central-Southern ones, although there are still substantive differences between Italian and its numerous Central and Southern siblings.³ These dialects differ not only in terms of their phonology, and in terms of their lexical items; there are also important syntactic differences which are quite significant and which, taken together with notable phonological and lexical differences, can render different dialects mutually incomprehensible. Consider in this regard a completely random example sentence, seen in (1), from the dialect of Borgomanero, a Gallo-Italic dialect spoken in the Province of Novara in the Piedmont region of Northern Italy.

- (1) *i vangumma già-nni da dü agni.* (Tortora, 2014)
 [We’ve been seeing each other for two years already].

Deciphering (1): the first element, *i*, is a so-called obligatory subject clitic pronoun, in the 1st person plural form, i.e. ‘we’ (note that Standard Italian does not have subject clitics); the second element, *vangumma*, is Borgomanerese for *vediamo* (‘we see’); the word *già* (‘already’) is one word in the sentence that would be recognizable to a student of Standard Italian; the form *nni* is the Borgomanerese equivalent of Italian *ci* meaning ‘us/ourselves’ (though *nni* and *ci* are not etymologically related; rather, *nni* is etymologically related to Italian *noi* ‘we/us’); finally, *da dü agni* means ‘for two years’, which in Italian would be *da due anni*). Note further the unfamiliar placement of the object clitic pronoun *nni* ‘ourselves’, following the adverb *già* ‘already’. The syntax of object clitic pronouns in this linguistic variety is quite different from that of Standard Italian, which would have the clitic pronoun appear to the left of the tensed verb (*ci vediamo*).

This very simple sentence reveals a number of quite significant morpho-syntactic differences between Borgomanerese and Italian. Such structural differences among the dialects can be so major that they can give rise to utterances which look so different from Italian, as to make Spanish look like Italian’s twin sister by comparison.

Of course there is no room in this article to give endless examples of sentences from hundreds of Italian dialects which would exhibit the robust syntactic, phonological, and lexical differences among these varieties, underscoring that each of these dialects is a unique fully-fledged and fully-functioning language in its own right. To give a brief taste here, I include in example (2) a list of some points of syntactic variation in the Italian dialects, but this list is by no means exhaustive; note too that it does not include the question of phonological and lexical variation.

- (2) Some points of grammatical variation (excludes phonological and lexical variation); see Gerhard Rohlfs’ three-volume *Grammatica storica della lingua italiana e dei suoi dialetti* for a more complete overview:

- a. whether or not the dialect uses subject clitics, and if so, in which persons and numbers are the subject clitics obligatory, and what kinds of syntactic structures require/forbid their use (e.g. Benincà, 1983; Cardinaletti and Repetti, 2008; Parry, 1995; Poletto, 2000; Poletto and Tortora, forthcoming; Renzi and Vanelli, 1983);
- b. what the dialect's object clitic pronouns look like, and where they are placed in the sentence (which may depend on whether the verb is in a simple or compound tense, and whether it's in the imperative, or indicative, or infinitival form) (e.g. Benincà and Cinque, 1993; Burzio, 1986; Cardinaletti and Shlonsky, 2004; Kayne, 1991; Ledgeway and Lombardi, 2005; Pons, 1990; Rasom, 2006; Roberts, 1993; Tortora, 2002, 2010, 2014; Tuttle, 1992);
- c. whether or not the dialect uses the simple past tense form or the present perfect (in place of the simple past) (e.g. Giorgi and Pianesi, 1997; Maiden, 2004);
- d. what influences how the auxiliary verbs 'have' vs 'be' are used in the compound tenses (verb type? tense? person (first, second, or third)? number? where does the object clitic pronoun appear in the sentence?) (e.g. Chiominto, 1984; Cocchi, 1995; Kayne, 1993; Loporcaro, 1988);
- e. what the dialect's interrogative pronouns (who, what, where, when . . .) look like, where these interrogative pronouns are placed in the sentence (at the end, at the beginning, both?), and whether they co-occur with complementizers like *che* (Munaro, 1999; Munaro and Poletto, 2002; Munaro and Pollock, 2005; Parry, 2003; Tortora, 1997);
- f. what the dialect's negative markers (i.e. negation) look like (*no, non, nen, pa, brisa, n*), how many are used in a sentence, and where they appear in the sentence (e.g. Parry, 1998; Zanuttini, 1997);
- g. whether the dialect has different complementizers for different kinds of subordination (indicative, subjunctive) (e.g. Ledgeway, 2009);
- h. how subject-verb agreement works, which can depend in part on where the subject is in the sentence (e.g. Saccò, 1993; Tortora, 1999);
- i. the form of past participles, and whether and under what syntactic conditions they agree with their direct objects (e.g. Smith, 1995);
- j. variation in uses of the conditional and subjunctive (e.g. Vincent and Bentley, 1995)

I would like to make one final comment here before I move on to a discussion of how this relates to the linguistic heritage of Italian-Americans. Those who wish to defend the legitimacy of Italian dialects often note that many of the dialects have rich literary histories. While this is true, we must also recall that there are also many others which have never been written down. It should be underscored, however, that the absence of a written tradition does not render a dialect any less of a legitimate language. All Italian dialects, like all human languages, no matter how historically, politically, and literarily humble or high profile, are linguistic systems complete with complex rules of syntax and phonology and with lexical items that have varied etymological histories. (As a side note, we could argue that in any case a language does not need a writing system in order to have a literary tradition; consider in this regard the bardic traditions of pre-literate societies.)

3. The reality of Italian-American linguistic heritage

This brings us to the ancestors of today's Italian-Americans. What do we know about the languages they spoke? Consider the wave of Italian emigration to America between the 1880s and the 1920s.⁴ Here I will reference some pertinent points of my own paternal family history, only because it serves as a quick and easy way for me to illustrate some points; in general terms, it surely is not atypical for a American family who has at least one Italian grandparent who came to the US before the Second World War.

My paternal grandfather spoke the dialect of Altavilla Irpina (a town in the Province of Avellino, in the Campania region); he did not speak Italian. My paternal grandmother spoke a rural dialect from the Chieti area (a town in Abruzzo), and likewise did not speak Italian. Precisely because of their diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, early 20th century Staten Island English was the more obvious choice for communication with each other, as neither used the other's dialect.⁵ As such, their children (including my father) were not exposed much to household discourse in their dialects. The dialects were thus lost on the children, possibly not necessarily (or only) because of cultural oppression or because of a desire to become more 'American,' but because each parent did not use the other as an interlocutor in their native language. Of course, it would go without saying at this point in the discussion that Italian – i.e. the Standard language – could not have possibly played a role in language development for *anyone* in this family (cultural oppression or not, mixed families or not), as it was simply not part of the array of ambient languages in the home.

Anecdotal evidence aside, research shows that my grandparents' linguistic reality (namely that they did not speak Italian but rather the dialects of their respective towns) was the general reality of Italian immigrants in the earlier part of the century. Here I'll quote Maiden (1995: 8) regarding the linguistic status quo of Italy in the late 1800s:

Estimates of the number of those able to speak Italian at the time of the Unification range between 2.5% of the population, according to De Mauro (1976), through 9.52% (or about two and a quarter million persons), according to Castellani (1982), to 12%, suggested by Serianni. (1990: 18 n6)

Even if we adhere to the most liberal estimate of how many Italians spoke Italian in the years following Unification, it is unlikely that this purported 12% included much of the population destined to leave Italy as a result of poverty, starvation, and no educational or other opportunities for bettering itself. Rather the 2.5 to 12 per cent of the population who spoke Italian at the time of Unification and the decades following were literate lawyers, notaries, doctors, university professors, writers, and philosophers, people that generally did not have any pressing need to leave Italy. As Maiden notes, the centuries-long *Questione della Lingua* in Italy thus became, after Unification, specifically a question 'about the best means of extending knowledge of the language to the Italian people at large' (Maiden, 1995: 8), because

‘... Italian [was]... remote from the everyday speech of most Italians.’ This was, furthermore, the linguistic status quo up until the Second World War. And even today, although the overwhelming majority of Italians in Italy understands and uses Italian, a relatively recent survey (Maiden, 1995: 9–10, citing Doxa, 1998), which investigates what language is used in the home and other intimate settings, shows that only 34.4% of the Italian population in Italy uses Italian exclusively. That means that 65.6% of the Italian population still uses dialect at home and with friends (with 60.4% reporting themselves to use Italian at least some of the time). Now, returning to the Italians who left for America in the period after Unification and before the First World War, which represents the largest wave of immigration out of Italy: given everything that I have said about Italian dialects, we can be absolutely sure that an overwhelming majority of these people, the ancestors of many of today’s Italian-Americans, did not speak Italian, either as a first or as a second language.

With this backdrop, I would like to now turn to the question of Italian language instruction in the United States today, and in particular the discourse of its promotion among Italian-Americans, which frequently appeals to the idea that Italian is the language of our ancestors.

4. Italian as a way to connect with one’s family and heritage?

As I stated in my introduction, the teaching and learning of Standard Italian is often promoted as a way for members of the diaspora to connect with their heritage and/or their living parents or grandparents. It is not immediately obvious how to back my claim up with hard data; my impressions begin with personal experience in college and university environments. When I first took Italian in high school in 1983, my Italian teacher used the ‘appeal to heritage’ argument as a means for encouraging his students. Having been continuously connected with language instructors in colleges and universities since that time, over the decades I have been hearing the ‘appeal to heritage’ argument more and more (certainly for languages such as Italian, Spanish, and Chinese).⁶ In present times, at meetings where colleagues discuss how to generate interest in language learning, approaches for reaching out to ‘heritage speakers’ are almost always raised.

However, we can put aside my own personal memories, anecdotes, experiences, and impressions: a quick perusal of the internet reveals that this general premise is shared by various constituents devoted to advancing the learning of Italian. I would like to go over a few examples here; note that I found the relevant websites after Googling the phrases ‘Why study Italian?’ and ‘Why learn Italian?’

Let us begin with the following statement, made by the *Concordia Language Villages* website. In response to the self-posed question ‘Why learn Italian?’ the Concordia website states:

- (3) Because you want to connect with the past. Whether you want to **chat with Nonna in her native tongue**, decipher that family spaghetti sauce recipe, or just expand your

knowledge of the rich heritage of Southern Europe. (www.concordialanguagevillages.org/newsite/Languages/italian1.php; 9 April 2009; accessed 17 November 2013; bold added)

As the reader may already know, *Concordia Language Villages* is a language and cultural immersion program, run out of Minnesota, which administers programs in 15 languages. As can be seen by their statement, the directors of this language program believe that knowledge of Italian will allow you to talk to your grandmother, who by presupposition must be a speaker of Italian (i.e. of the language taught in the classroom).

Let us consider another, similar set of statements made on the *about.com* guide to Italian. As can be seen in example (4), again in response to the self-posed question ‘Why study Italian?’, the author Michael San Filippo, who has an MA in *Italian Studies* (received from the Middlebury College Italian School Abroad program in Florence, Italy), states that:

(4) Many Italian Americans today are getting in touch with their family heritage by **learning their ancestors’ native language**. Ultimately they are looking for ways to identify, understand, and bond with their family’s ethnic background. (<http://italian.about.com/library/poll/blpollindex.htm>; 9 April 2009; accessed 17 November 2013; bold added)

In a related link on the same website, Mr San Filippo gives the ‘Top Ten Reasons to Learn Italian,’ with reason number 6 on his list presented here:

(5) Top Ten Reasons to Learn Italian

[number 6] **Converse with your Italian-born grandparents.**

(<http://italian.about.com/od/grammar/a/aa082405a.htm>; 9 April 2009; accessed 17 November 2013; bold added)

In the same spirit, in a 2008 piece called *What They Say About The Italian Language*, run in the web-based magazine *i-Italy (the Italian/American Digital Project)*, two prominent Italian-Americans commented on why Italian-Americans should learn Italian. Let us start with the commentary in example (6), given by Louis Tallarini, then-President of the *Columbus Citizens Foundation*, and also previously on the Board of Trustees of the *Italian American Museum* [Little Italy, New York]:

(6) In order to preserve our cultural being, not only for us but for our children as well, we must know and promote the language, culture, traditions and art of our ancestors. Unfortunately Italians in America, and elsewhere in the world, have done a poor job in

preserving, teaching and promoting **the Italian language**, culture, traditions and the knowledge and history of Italian art history. (www.i-italy.org/2335/what-they-say-about-italian-language; 3 June 2008; bold added)

As can be seen, when Tallarini says that we must know and promote the language of our ancestors, he is referring to the ‘Italian language.’

In example (7), we see a statement regarding the importance of learning the Italian language, made by Kenneth Ciongoli, a neurologist and former president and chairman of the National Italian American Foundation (NIAF):

(7) As a scientist it . . . occurred to me that my brain, the shape of my mouth and throat, my vocal cords, all were adapted for **the Italian language**. I am thoroughly American and the acquisition of **the language of my ancestors** can only improve an understanding of my **ancestral culture** and of myself. (www.i-italy.org/2335/what-they-say-about-italian-language; bold added)

I will put aside here the problematic nature of the claim that a human being’s brain and shape of the oral cavity is genetically adapted for any one particular language. What is interesting to note for the present purposes is that, while Kenneth Ciongoli claims Italian as his ancestral language, his paternal grandfather, Antonio Ciongoli, emigrated from the Campania region in 1902 (and his paternal grandmother was from Ischia, also in the Campania region). Given their region of origin, and the time that they emigrated to the United States, there is a very good chance that Ciongoli’s grandparents were not, in fact, speakers of Italian (as predicted by Maiden, 1995, above); at the very least we can be certain that, even if they did speak Italian, they would have spoken it as a second language (where their first language would likely have been a variety of Neapolitan).

5. Why the disconnect?

Ciongoli, like the others whose comments I have reviewed, seems to be claiming Italian (that is, the language that is taught in the schools in Italy and in Italian language departments around the world) as the language of his ancestors. Since I believe that the comments I have reviewed represent a general sentiment that exists, I would like to turn now to two final questions in this article, the first of which I address immediately here (the second appears as question (8)):

(8) Why does it feel natural to adopt the idea that Italian was the language spoken by our ancestors, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary – including the high probability that each Italian-American family has its own private discourse about their ‘dialect’?

The answer to this question is very complex, and involves everything from sociology, to word meaning, to lack of awareness (by which I mean, simple lack of knowledge of

the historical and sociolinguistic details). As such I cannot do full justice to the question here, especially with respect to the sociology of hegemony (whereby the preferences of an elite social class result in the devaluing of the cultural norms of the non-elite), so I put the matter aside.⁷ I therefore explore some simple ideas. Specifically, in what follows, I pursue the idea that when (a) the ambiguousness of the terms *dialect* and *Italian* joins forces with (b) a lack of awareness of the linguistic facts, we are led to a serious rhetorical tangle. This tangle I argue is in turn what hinders us from gaining a precise understanding of what we really mean to accomplish with the ‘appeal to heritage’ argument, in the pursuit of attracting ‘heritage students’ to the language classroom.

5.1 What does the word *dialect* mean?

Let us begin with the question of what Italian-Americans sometimes mean by the term *dialect*. It is clear that the only linguistic artifact left to many second and third generation descendants of early 20th century Italian immigrants is a handful of dialect words. Given the rampant language loss, it is not unreasonable for such descendants to think of the mere fragments that we are left with – the handful of dialect words – as that which constitutes ‘dialect.’ It is clear that many Italian-Americans cherish these words as proud emblems of ethnic identity; living in an Italian-American neighborhood on Staten Island, I hear words (some derived from phrases) like *stunòd*, *waliò*, *gumbà*, *gapagòl*, *guguziel*, *galamàd* (or *galamàr*), *fangùl*, *oogàtz*, *gulafòd* (or *gulafòr*), and *gizuhdeech* peppering the speech of the people around me. Users of these words often characterize this as ‘speaking dialect.’ That is, it is not uncommon to hear a person say ‘I speak dialect,’ to mean they have knowledge of words like these (but no Italian dialect linguistic system to go with it). What does this mean? Many such speakers do not actually speak an Italian dialect at all (which as we discussed in sections 1 and 2 above, are full-fledged languages with complex syntactic and phonological systems, structurally weaving together thousands of words). Rather, what ‘speaking dialect’ has come to mean for some Italian-Americans is knowledge of a collection of 20 or so words, an infinitesimally small and structureless fragment of the dialect that was spoken in previous generations.

The discourse used by Italian-American journalist Maria Laurino illustrates very clearly this idea that ‘Italian dialect’ can mean ‘an array of a few words.’ In a YouTube interview about her book *Were You Always An Italian?* Laurino states:

- (9) I have a chapter in my book called *Words*, and it’s about **Italian dialect**: I argue that Italian dialect is kind of our yiddish, that **there’s a whole arsenal of words that lots of Italian Americans know**. (www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1MqrpRLJoM)

Here (and throughout her chapter on *Words*), Laurino conflates the concept of knowledge of an ‘arsenal of words’ on the one hand and knowledge of an

entire language on the other. This alternative sense of the term ‘dialect’ (=an arsenal of 20 or so words) dismisses any notion of intricate grammatical and phonological rules, and a lexicon of thousands of words, which allow speakers to form complex sentences, read and understand literature, and limitlessly converse about abstractions, emotions, aspirations, complex problems, philosophy, religion, and science.

Another example of this idea that ‘a few words = dialect’ is found on page 101 of her book, where she states:

- (10) We spoke only English at home, but **my parents kept alive an assortment of southern Italian dialect words** that signaled a quiet intimacy or set off the alarms of subterfuge. **Dialect was our private language** . . . (Laurino, 2000: 101; bold added)

Here again she equates ‘an assortment of dialect words’ with ‘dialect.’ It is important to note that Laurino explicitly states elsewhere that she does not speak an Italian dialect; yet at the same time she consistently refers to the ‘assortment of words’ as ‘dialect.’ This underscores the fact that ‘dialect’ can have two different meanings for an Italian-American. However, the two meanings can get confused for Laurino, as a single token of the word ends up at times being used to simultaneously (and contradictorily) reference the two distinct and mutually exclusive meanings. Specifically, in her chapter on *Faith*, she states that in order to understand a Neapolitan poem she had to rely ‘on a translation,’ as:

- (11) . . . [the author] Russo’s **Neapolitan dialect** bore no resemblance to **the words** I knew . . . (Laurino, 2000: 156; bold added)

This conflation of the two different definitions of ‘dialect’ (Russo’s Neapolitan dialect = fully fledged language, vs a list of 20 words = dialect) in fact makes the statement in (11) incoherent. It is not the case that the Neapolitan poet’s dialect bears no resemblance to Laurino’s words because we are dealing with two distinct and mutually incomprehensible linguistic systems; rather, the poet’s dialect (which is a linguistic system) cannot bear resemblance to Laurino’s words because Laurino’s words are not a linguistic system. Lacking the entire linguistic system underlying Neapolitan would thus be the single most important factor making Laurino incapable of understanding the poem (and not the fact that she knows some words that are not part of the Neapolitan lexicon).

Let me be clear: I am not claiming that Laurino’s (and other Italian-Americans’) definition of *dialect* or ‘speaking dialect’ as an ‘knowledge of arsenal of words’ is incorrect. (I would be engaging in the same kind of unproductive prescriptivism I am trying to argue against in this article if I were to claim that a word can have only one definition.) Rather, I take my entire series of observations to indicate that the term *dialect* or the phrase ‘speaking dialect’ has for some speakers semantically shifted to take on another meaning. It is not unreasonable for Italian Americans to have assigned a new and different meaning to the word or concept, especially given that many live in a world where the actual Italian dialects (=fully-fledged linguistic

systems) do not exist, and where they have little access to anything that would expose them to the linguist's definition of 'Italian dialect' (which involves the deep questions of linguistic histories; how did Vulgar Latin evolve into these dialects; what is the structure of their grammars; what are their songs, poetry, and literature like; how are they related to other Romance languages; and what is their sociology within Italy). My only purpose here is to underscore that a word like *dialect* can have more than one meaning. Furthermore, as I discuss more at length in section 6, sometimes such ambiguities can lead to a confusion of ideas, if one does not remain vigilant in one's awareness of which meaning is intended at any given moment.

5.2 What does the word *Italian* mean?

As we just saw, the word *dialect* has come to be ambiguous. It either has the meaning that linguists use (=a full-fledged language) or it has the meaning that some Italian-Americans use (=handful of words used by people who embrace an Italian-American identity). To add to the complexity of the situation, the word *Italian* also wreaks a certain havoc, given its own ambiguity. The word 'Italian,' as it refers to language, is generally used to pick out the Standard language; but not always. There is another use this word seems to have, which is operationalized by scholars and lay Italians alike, in certain contexts. Let us examine this more closely.

While it is true that all Italians have a linguistic heritage that is not the language we call Standard Italian, it is also true that Italians distinguish between that which is 'Italian' and that which is 'not Italian,' when it comes to language. For example, the dialect of Borgomanero I discussed in section 2, or Neapolitan, or the Sicilian spoken in Palermo (Palermitano), or the Abruzzese spoken in Chieti (Chietino) – these are all understood to be Italian dialects. Why are they called *Italian* dialects (despite what we know about their linguistic status, discussed extensively in section 1)? In what sense are they 'Italian'? For starters, they are 'Italian' inasmuch as there are other varieties which are clearly 'not Italian.' For example, Mòcheno, spoken in the Province of Trent, is a Germanic variety (closely related to Bavarian German). Arbëreshë, spoken in pocket communities in southern Italy, is a variety of Albanian. Thus, although these are linguistic varieties which are obviously embedded in Italy, they are not 'Italian' in a sense that is obvious to everyone (but perhaps difficult to pin down, when push comes to shove). Loosely speaking, 'Italian' in this sense refers to a language that is indigenous to Italy, where derivation from Latin is a necessary feature.⁸ Because of this sense of the word, Italians will often use the word 'Italian' even to refer to dialects, most especially when the distinction between dialects (Borgomanerese vs Neapolitan?) is completely unimportant to the conversation.

Even linguists themselves, even in the context of a discussion of the Italian dialects, will sometimes use the word 'Italian' as a shortcut, to mean 'those languages that are indigenous to Italy and that are derived from Latin' (i.e. the Italian dialects, and not just the Standard language). For example, Haller (1997), who focusses exclusively on the dialects, states (p. 401) that his chapter 'will focus on **Italian** as

a community language in the USA . . .’ (bold added). Then, immediately following the section heading *Italian dialects in the USA* (p. 401) he states: ‘Although **Italian** was already present in the USA in the seventeenth century . . .’ (bold added). A perusal of almost any writing by an Italian dialectologist will reveal that ‘Italian’ (and also ‘italiano’) is often used with this meaning. Similarly, I know one linguist from Northern Italy who is fluent in both Italian (as a second language) and Mòcheno (as a first language); in contexts where she wants to distinguish the two (say, in talking about which language she speaks to her children), she will refer to the latter as ‘tedesco’ (=German). Again, here she does not mean Standard German; rather, she literally means she speaks Mòcheno with her children; her use of the word ‘tedesco’ is to efficiently create a sense that in the context of Italian culture she is dealing with two poles, so to speak (Italian/non-Italian), the exact details of which are irrelevant (such that the level of contrast that words like ‘German’ and ‘Italian’ make is enough for the question at hand). Importantly, we must understand that use of words like ‘German’ and ‘Italian’ in these contexts does not mean that these scholars are somehow confused about what the words mean. Rather, the words ‘Italian’ and ‘German’ simply have multiple meanings. Indeed, the way that Haller (1997) uses the word ‘Italian’ in the above quotes underscores the fact that it can just mean ‘those languages that are indigenous to Italy and that are derived from Latin’ – and not to mean the Standard language.

Lay Italian dialect speakers likewise may use the term ‘Italian’ simply to mean the language that they speak, their dialect, in opposition to things that are ‘not Italian.’ Sometimes this can lead to confusion, given that ‘Italian’ can also mean ‘the Standard language.’ In this regard, I will recount a relevant anecdote, regarding an experience I had several years ago in the town of Altavilla Irpina (Province of Avellino) in Campania, where most (though not all) people now speak Italian in addition to the dialect. Specifically, I started speaking to a person in a café, who I stupidly assumed knew ‘Standard Italian.’ As it turned out, he was a mono-lingual *dialettofono*, so he responded by engaging in a long narrative in the dialect of Altavilla, which I of course did not understand. At a certain point, a bilingual dialect/Italian speaker present at the scene yelled at him (in dialect) to ‘Speak to her in Italian!’ But what did ‘Italian’ mean to my rescuer, and what did it mean to the *dialettofono*? The *dialettofono*’s response was ‘I *am* speaking to her in Italian!’ As the two went back and forth in a maddening ‘who’s-on-first’-type discussion about who was and who was not speaking ‘Italian,’ I saw that the *dialettofono* took the word ‘Italian’ to mean the language he was speaking, his dialect; after all, he certainly was not speaking in English or German or Chinese. In contrast, the bilingual dialect/Italian rescuer took ‘Italian’ precisely to mean ‘not dialect.’⁹

The fact that the term ‘Italian’ can get used to mean ‘Italian dialect’ is also exhibited in the US Census records, which report ‘Italian’ as the language of many US households. Here I would like to point out a specific piece of information I found in the 1930 Census Record from Staten Island, regarding my paternal grandfather’s family. The Record includes my great grandfather, his wife, and their children. Under ‘Mother Tongue (or Native Language) of Foreign Born,’ my great

grandparents and their three oldest children (including my grandfather) are listed as speaking ‘Italian.’ What could this possibly mean? We know that no one in my family spoke ‘Standard Italian’ – they spoke the dialect of Altavilla, so why do the 1930 Census records say that they spoke Italian? The only conclusion one can draw here is that again the word ‘Italian’ is being used not to mean Standard Italian, but an Italian dialect. Which dialect, it does not matter. It seems that all parties involved in this 1930 Census interview – Census taker and respondents alike – did not think it important to get any more nuanced than ‘Italian.’

This is important, because Census data are often appealed to in the list of reasons to study the Italian language. This can be found on the internet, where the websites of many universities and organizations designed to promote the teaching and learning of Italian state that one should study Italian because ‘Italian is the fourth most frequently spoken foreign language in U.S. homes, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000).’ The following are some URLs where this can be found:

<http://italian.utk.edu/major.php> [University of Tennessee]
www.lec.edu/pdf/Why%20study%20Italian.pdf [Lake Erie College]
<http://faculty.virginia.edu/italianresource/why.html> [University of Virginia]
www.jmu.edu/italiano/whyitalian.shtml [James Madison University]
www.ritornello.com/whyit.html

But as the 1930 Census records of my family show, we have to be careful how to interpret the Census data. The language that an Italian(-American) family intends when reporting ‘Italian’ on the Census might not be the same language as that being taught in the classroom.

6. Why would any of this matter?

With all of these observations in place, let us get back to the question in (8), and summarize. As we have seen, language death among Italian-Americans (together with Standard Italian hegemony) has led to a lack of awareness of what it was that Italian immigrants (especially from the pre-World War Two era) were actually speaking, and has given rise to a totally new and different meaning of the word *dialect*. In addition, the word *Italian* is used ambiguously, sometimes to mean the dialects and sometimes to refer to Standard Italian. This ambiguity itself may be adding to the confusion: if the word Italian can also mean ‘Italian dialect,’ then the claim that our ancestors spoke ‘Italian’ is actually not incorrect if the word is being used to mean an Italian dialect (i.e. *dialect* in the linguist’s sense). However, because the word is ambiguous, we can be led to conflate the two meanings, and can end up erroneously tripping ourselves up into the conclusion that the language taught in Italian departments is the heritage language of Italian-Americans.

Why should we care about any of this? Because the facts matter, and the facts matter for a reason. If we engage in the ‘appeal to heritage’ argument to attract

students to the classroom, without even being clear ourselves on what ‘heritage language’ means in relation to the language actually being taught, we are destined to lead ourselves down a path of heartache and frustration for everyone involved. In one breath we entice Italian-Americans into the Italian language classroom by promising that we can help them tap into and embrace their rich and varied heritage; but in the other breath, once they are inside the classroom we send the message that there is only one Italian language, and that the real bits of linguistic heritage they bring with them are not legitimate. I cannot be the only person who has heard some language teachers refer to Heritage Language Learners as ‘the worst students,’ the feeling being that these students bring to the classroom all kinds of ‘ungrammatical’ and ‘incorrect’ uses of the language that just get in the way of the lesson plan. Accounts from heritage students reveal that they often feel humiliated, sometimes enough to drop their Italian language class, because of some door-closing claim that a word the student was asking about ‘doesn’t exist,’ or that the student cannot seem to understand that the pronunciation of the word *capisco* ‘I understand’ as [kap’iško] (with a palatal fricative [š] instead of an [s]) is incorrect. Even the most basic understanding of the issues I discussed in section 1 reveals that there would naturally be many words that a heritage speaker would know which do not necessarily exist in an Italian dictionary, or that use of a palatal [š] in *capisco* is in fact the rule in some Italian dialects. And in a nation where language instruction is in danger of getting ever decreasing amounts of support, it makes little sense to make statements which are incorrect and uninformed and which drive heritage students away.

I would like to summarize at this point my main thesis, especially since my discussion in this article has in past presentations provoked questions such as the following: ‘Are you claiming we shouldn’t teach Standard Italian?’ Or ‘Given that there are hundreds of dialects, isn’t it just impossible to have one class for each dialect?’ Or ‘Isn’t your insistence on recognizing Italian linguistic diversity going to divide us rather than unite us?’ Such questions suggest to me that it is important to state the basic thesis over again: I am not arguing that we stop teaching Standard Italian in favor of the dialects. Rather, I am arguing that we be clear on what we mean to accomplish with the ‘appeal to heritage’ argument. If we mean to ‘appeal to heritage’ as a fast way of getting more students into the language classroom, with no plan of backing up the rhetoric behind it with an appropriate lesson plan, then we have to be aware of what it is we are doing. However, if we have genuine, pedagogically sound motivation for using the Italian language classroom to connect Italian-American students to their heritage, then we need to be clear about what that motivation is. And as I have argued here, it will be impossible to clarify what the motivation is without understanding the ways in which the connection between Italian-American heritage and the Italian language of the classroom is complicated and indirect.

Furthermore, if we have honest intentions of helping our students, we have to go into the classroom informed and coherent, with the necessary awareness of the facts covered in section 1 of this article, and with a clear understanding of the ways in which words like *dialect* and *Italian* are ambiguous. If a student says something like ‘I can’t find the word *gizuhdeech* in the dictionary,’ as pedagogues we have

before us the quintessence of a teaching moment. We could fail to embrace this moment by saying ‘that’s not a word’ or ‘that’s not Italian’ or ‘that’s bad Italian.’ Alternatively, we could succeed in the teaching moment by using the student’s query to get at all kinds of instructive comparisons between dialect and Standard, which in turn would help the student understand Italian (and its historical context) even better. For example: ‘Let’s compare this string to Italian *che si dice*.’ Right there one could talk specifically about (a) the vowel [i] vs schwa; (b) voiced vs voiceless stops like [k] vs [g]; (c) verb-endings like *-e* in *dice*; and (d) the concept of speech acts and semantic change, whereby *ghi zə dič* can come to just be an unanalyzable greeting rather than a true question. A discussion like this capitalizes on the student’s drive to understand these language lessons (given their own motivation to get at the answer). In all of this we would have a mini success story of language learning, all made possible without negating the fact that the subject matter is Standard Italian.

7. Concluding remarks

Nowhere in my discussion in this article have I explicitly suggested that Italian dialects be incorporated into college-level Italian language curricula. I will use these closing remarks to speak to this question. There are two possible ways to go: either (a) we do not actively incorporate Italian dialects into the Italian language curriculum and just passively wait for heritage students to raise questions; or (b) we actively incorporate Italian dialects into the Italian language curriculum. There is actually an already decades-old history of Italian language scholars arguing for (b) and I hope that this article has indirectly reinforced the validity of that work, most especially if we are to continue with the ‘appeal to heritage’ approach to attracting students into the language classroom. The works of Haller (1993, 1997, 2011) represent research aimed at understanding the actual linguistic properties of, and Italian-American attitudes towards, American Italian; Haller (1980), Danesi (1986), and Repetti (1996) have all carefully considered numerous possibilities for approaches to the question of incorporating dialects into the Italian language curriculum, with explicit reference to the question of heritage speakers. Haller (1980) and Repetti (1996) specifically call for a required course on Italian dialectology to be at the center of Italian curricula, while Cravens (1996) gives a rich and informative historical overview of arguments in favor of incorporating basic linguistics into language curricula (and includes an extensive and very useful bibliography). At the College of Staten Island, I worked with colleagues in the Italian Studies program to devise a linguistics course called *Structures of Italian*, which includes the Italian dialects. In this regard, the College of Staten Island is at the cutting edge, relatively speaking; but even here it must be noted that this course is not obligatory. As with many other Italian programs, it is entirely possible to get a BA in Italian Studies at the College of Staten Island without ever having heard of the Italian dialects, this despite the fact that Italian dialects quite plainly make up a central part of Italy’s linguistic and cultural history (something which goes well beyond the question of heritage speakers).

As over 34 years have passed since the first of the studies I cite here, and almost 19 years have passed since the last of these, we have to ask ourselves why it is still possible for someone to graduate in Italian without knowing anything about the dialects, of which Standard Italian is only one. At the same time, we also need to ask why we think it is so important to try and ‘sell’ the Italian language as the language of the ancestors of many Italian-Americans, when it simply is not true. Are we afraid that if we do not come up with enough reasons for why people should study Italian, it will lose caste? If so, should we not come up with reasons that are consistent with fact?

If as Italian pedagogues we decide that Italian dialectology is unimportant, we should abandon the ‘appeal to heritage’ argument. If we agree that the ‘appeal to heritage’ argument is an essential part of promoting Italian language learning, then we need to take seriously the recommendations made in these seminal works.

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Notes

1. The issues I raise here are already complicated by the fact that words like ‘Italian,’ ‘Chinese,’ and so forth are themselves ambiguous, where ambiguity arises in part because ‘nationality’ and ‘ethnicity’ are distinct, but sometimes partially overlapping, constructs. The adjective ‘Chinese’ for example can describe a nationality, or it can describe an ethnicity. Thus, it is true to say that an ethnic Manchurian or Uyghur citizen of China is ‘Chinese,’ if we are referring to nationality; but this label might not be accepted by such Chinese citizens who identify primarily as ethnically Manchurian or Uyghur, an identity which itself could depend for example on language, culture, and/or religion. In contrast, for a Chinese citizen who ethnically identifies as Han, the term ‘Chinese’ might cover both constructs. Similarly, it may be accurate to say that an ethnic Cimbrian citizen of (the Province of Trent in) Italy is Italian – again, if we are referring to nationality; but matters are complicated if one considers what it might mean to be ethnically ‘Italian,’ as opposed to ethnically ‘German.’

I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for rightly noting how complex these issues are. For starters, ethnicity, as a construct, is not straightforwardly defined, nor is it a given that a single individual embraces a single ethnicity; a person can embrace an additive plurality of ethnic identities (such as a person identifying as Colombian plus Italian plus American), or a web of interconnected, partially overlapping, or hierarchized ethnicities (such as a person identifying as Sicilian /Italian, or Boyacense/Colombian, etc.). By no means do I believe I can do any justice to these complicated questions – which are much better handled by scholars in the fields of Cultural Anthropology, Sociology, or Cultural Studies. I only raise the issue in relation to the fact that such complications are precisely what give rise to the fact that words such as ‘Chinese,’ ‘Italian,’ etc are problematic, inasmuch as they are rich in polysemy. Despite the difficulties, I do not abandon the question, and we shall return to these terms in section 5.

2. However, it is also worth noting (as one anonymous reviewer pointed out) that different types of *koiné* were used in 13th century literary texts (e.g. Lombard, Veneto, Sicilian). I thank the reviewer for bringing this fact to the discussion.
3. This is an oversimplification; as Figure 1 shows, the dialect divisions are more complex than the text discussion reveals. Although there is a major division between North on the one hand, and Central-South on the other, there is also a major division between Central and Southern varieties. And as can be seen, the Central group further divides (where Tuscan is in a class of its own), as do the Southern varieties (i.e. South vs extreme South) such that Sicilian, Southern Calabria, and Southern Puglia (Salento) are distinguished from a ‘northern’ South.
4. In the ensuing discussion, I do not mean to ignore the continued immigration from Italy to the US in subsequent decades, from the 1920s to the present. More recent immigration, most especially in the post-war period, is extremely important to all the questions addressed in this article; it complicates the various issues raised in very interesting ways, in part because the linguistic profile of many recent Italian immigrants is likely to be different than that of the pre-war Italian immigrants. Coupled with numerous other factors (such as growing transnationalism in recent years), this creates layers and webs of cultural and linguistic identity that truly problematize the notion of Italian-American linguistic and cultural identity. This is a very complex issue, and as such I cannot address it here. However, it is my hope that my focus on late 19th / early 20th century immigration allows me to nevertheless support the main thesis of this article.
5. I am oversimplifying to some degree; my understanding is that over time my paternal grandmother learned to converse to some extent in her husband’s dialect but this seems to have been just for the narrow purpose of accommodating her in-laws. This further raises complex sociological questions, regarding which of the two dialects had more prestige in this mixed family’s culture. In this case, my grandmother’s rural Abruzzese was overtly deemed to be of much lower prestige, in part because of her side of the family’s share-cropping background. Such hierarchies inside mixed Italian families could potentially lead to the transmission of only one dialect at the expense of another when one of the dialects is seen as more prestigious. This however did not happen in my paternal family’s case; neither of my grandparents’ varieties were transmitted to the children.
6. It may be worth noting here a potential difference between the Italian appeal-to-heritage situation on the one hand and Spanish/Chinese appeal-to-heritage situations on the other: in reference to language courses which are specifically designed with the heritage student in mind, one anonymous reviewer observes that courses for Spanish and Chinese heritage

language learners ‘typically target students who have oral competency, and seek to develop their written abilities, grammatical competency and accuracy and register awareness.’ The reviewer suggests that this contrasts with the Italian appeal-to-heritage situation. I thank this reviewer for pointing out this important difference, which also highlights a possible linguistic difference between many Italian-American students on the one hand and many Latino and Chinese-American students on the other.

- This might however be changing, or at least not be valid for every US location: for example, in my Fall 2010 *Structures of Italian* course (in the *Italian Studies Program* at the College of Staten Island), the majority of my students of Italian heritage had a good level of oral competency in (some form of regionalized) Italian; furthermore, a good few of these students had additional oral competency in a local dialect. Of course this is anecdotal, and given the location of my College, it might be the case that the makeup of our student body is not entirely representative of what one finds elsewhere in US institutions of higher learning.
7. This is not to imply that the complex sociological effects of hegemony are unimportant. On the contrary, it is arguably at the basis of the other two issues I discuss, i.e. lack of awareness and word meaning. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing me to Silverstein (1987) as suggested further reading on the issue of linguistic hegemony.
 8. This definition might have us exclude from the domain of reference the variety of Catalan spoken in Alghero, Sardinia – under the view that Catalan is in some sense not indigenous to Alghero. However, I hope it is clear that I do not wish to make any claims regarding how speakers of this Romance variety linguistically self-identify (or regarding how members of the community in contact with these speakers identify them). As such, I leave this question open.
 9. An anonymous reviewer wonders whether the dialettologo was using an Italianized version of his dialect, or perhaps making some attempt to ‘Italianize’ his speech. This is a good question, and of course it is entirely possible that the dialettologo was doing this – but unfortunately I will never know because my memory is simply that (a) I did not understand his speech and (b) my rescuer was accusing him of ‘not speaking Italian.’ If he was indeed attempting to Italianize his speech, then my characterization of the exchange in the text, which suggests that the dialettologo was using the word ‘Italian’ to mean ‘his dialect,’ must be re-thought.

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