

# LOSING MY LANGUAGE(S): FOR BETTER AND FOR WORSE

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*After emigrating to the United States as a teenager from Italy following World War II, the author "lost" both his native Calabrian dialect and the Italian that he had learned in elementary school as a second language. In this narrative he recalls his experiences with such losses and reflects on their potential significance for children and adolescents from current immigrant groups.*

Soon after returning from a recent trip to Italy, my native country, I read in *Reflections* the article by José Sisneros (2002) on "The Loss of a Language that I Never Had: A Story about Linguicide" (Sisneros). The article was fascinating, and the author's recollections about "losing the Spanish language" were strongly – and strangely – evocative. Suddenly, long-dormant memories of "losing" my own language were reawakened, and for weeks I found myself returning to such memories and struggling with their meaning at that juncture in my life. It was then that I realized that I had to write this article in which I first present some of my recollections and then consider their potential significance for social work practice with children from current immigrant groups.

## Personal Recollections

• World War II has finally ended, and many people begin to leave our impoverished village of Stefanaconi in Southern Italy.<sup>1</sup> The lucky ones emigrate to America, as did previous generations. And so, following an interminable bureaucratic process and a long sea voyage from Naples, Italy, in August 1948, my mother, three younger brothers, and I arrive at New York City and join my father, whom we had not seen for over nine years. As a naturalized citizen, he had returned to the U.S.A. in 1939 to pave the way for our immigration – a plan that soon fell through when Italy joined Germany in the war. Finally, here we are – reunited with a barely remembered father in a strange country with

an incomprehensible language. But I also recall how excited my brothers and I were. *America!* The very word evoked long-held visions of social and economic opportunities, along with cascading and clashing feelings of wonderment and bewilderment.

• Soon after arriving and settling in New Britain, Connecticut, my father takes us to the local Board of Education office where we are enrolled in public school. My brothers and I are bewildered as we do not speak English and do not understand whatever is going on. We realize that our proper names were Americanized, without our consent, and that we will soon be attending a junior high school near our home. Moreover, all four of us are assigned to the homeroom of a biology teacher along with other recent immigrants from Italy as well as other southern European countries. And here is a quick blow to my self-esteem: after having just been promoted to 11<sup>th</sup> grade in Italy, I find myself in the same homeroom as my brothers, the youngest of whom is nine years old.

• Although the time was long before the emergence of bilingual education, I recall with admiration how teachers and administrators in the midst of their many duties sought to provide us with an effective teaching experience. For example, the homeroom teacher, who was of Italian origin, would teach us some English words during class breaks; after reviewing our transcripts, the guidance counselor would arrange for us to spend some time in such classes as algebra, where the Spanish-speaking teacher would translate exams



into Italian for us; and the English teacher would meet with us after class to provide individualized instruction.

By the middle of the year, we had learned enough English to be transferred gradually to regular classes. Speaking the language, however, was very difficult, except for my youngest brother, who picked it up quickly and became rather proficient. In contrast, I rarely spoke in class except in response to direct queries from the teacher. I even recall going to the post office or grocery store and writing down my orders as I was ashamed of speaking with a marked accent.



- In high school and college, I continued to improve my skills in reading and writing in English, aided in no small measure by my knowledge of Latin and Greek. (These classical languages had been a substantial component of my education in Italy.) In contrast, I *talked* as little as I could get away with. By then I had also learned to avoid certain words or syllables that were particularly difficult to pronounce. (To this day, I still occasionally ask my wife or children how to pronounce certain words.)

My teachers must have wondered about my intellectual capacity and/or motivation. But my proficiency in writing counterbalanced the lack of involvement in class discussion, and at least some teachers recognized my “better” qualities and encouraged me in my studies. By the time I reached graduate school, I had learned enough English to be comfortable in speaking as well as writing and reading – though I would not describe myself as “loquacious.” However, my childhood dream of becoming a novelist had by then ended.

- As a young father, I tended to be rather overprotective with my children – and stricter

than my wife. (After all, she was *American*, and like all Americans rather permissive.) I still recall worrying about them much more than, in retrospect, seemed justified or reasonable. This was especially true as they began to “separate” from me after they learned to walk and, in particular, when they went off to school for the first time.

Some of my dearest memories are about my telling them in Italian various bedtime stories, or talking, also in Italian, about my own childhood experiences. While they did not comprehend anything that I was saying, they were amused and laughed and quickly went to sleep, probably wondering about their father’s mental health.

- In 1972 accompanied by my wife and three young children, I returned to Italy for the first time since leaving 24 years earlier. As the recipient of a Senior Fulbright Fellowship, I was based at the University of Padua and affiliated with the Fondazione Emanuela Zancan, a leading research, training, and advocacy organization in the human services. For several months, I traveled throughout Italy to offer consultation and seminars in the area of social work, particularly child and family services.

As I communicated mostly in Italian, which I had rarely spoken since first coming to the U.S., I felt strange and sad. I struggled to convey my ideas clearly, and found it equally difficult to understand what the participants were saying as they talked rapidly and often heatedly. These difficulties were exacerbated by the fact that Italian was actually my *second* language; my *native* language was the rather different local dialect of Calabria, a region that over the centuries had been exposed to the diverse languages of such conquerors as the Arabs, the Greeks, and the Romans.

- Following conclusion of the Fulbright fellowship, my family and I traveled to my native village, to be met by over 50 relatives

and friends at a nearby train station. This was a major event as I was the first of my genera-



tion to return from America. We remained there for two weeks, and the experience was for me almost surreal.

On the one hand, it was comforting to visit (and eat continually) with old relatives and friends and to meet cousins who had been born since I left; to hear and speak the old dialect as if I had never left; to walk in awe through the streets of our seemingly unchanged village; to visit the old cave where we fled, during the worst of the Allied bombing in World War II, seeking the illusion of safety.

But I was also sad and bewildered as I saw that many things had changed: the village had expanded into the country, and I occasionally got lost in one of the new sections; many of the people whom I had known had also emigrated, most recently to Northern European countries; younger people disdained the old dialect that for me represented comfort and security. And, above all, I realized that I no longer “belonged” there.

But where did I belong, and what was my identity? Was I American, Italian, or Italian-American? And what was my children’s ethnicity, especially since their mother was American? At the time it seemed as if I were the first human being to face these questions, although intellectually I, of course, knew that they were ancient and recurring for many immigrants through the ages. Underlying these questions was the theme of having “lost” not one but two languages, the same theme that Sisneros (2002) addressed.

### **Helping Immigrant Children and Youths**

Although I could go on with my recollections, it is time to consider what they might

mean in relation to the practice of social workers and others in the human services and in schools with children and youths from current immigrant groups, groups such as those from Asian and Latin American countries as well as children and young people from Puerto Rico and Mexico. Rather than engaging in a systematic and scientific analysis of the loss of language, I would like to see what the preceding narrative regarding my personal experiences might evoke as I reflect further from my current perspective as a social worker and social work educator<sup>2</sup>.

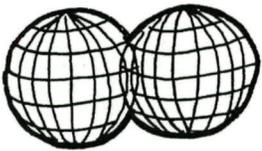
Perhaps the most important issue to consider is that of bilingual education<sup>3</sup>. In light of my own experiences, I am ambivalent about the current emphasis on bilingual education. On the one hand, I appreciate the arguments in its favor, especially in regard to preserving a young person’s cultural identity and family heritage. I also identify with Sisneros’ point (2002, p. 71) about the tragedy of “linguicide” experienced by many immigrants from Mexico through the loss of Spanish, that is, “the taking away of a language by the process of cultural genocide” (p. 71). And I recall – painfully – the rejection and frustration that my parents experienced as my brothers and I adopted English as our preferred language, even at home, while we appeared to reject, or at least forget, our native dialect as well as the Italian language. From their perspective, how could we be so thoughtless? How could we be so ruthlessly “American?” How could we forget our heritage? (I can appreciate their feelings, as to this day I am vaguely disappointed that none of my children learned Italian.)

On the other hand, there is no doubt that the then prevalent emphasis on acculturation and on learning English by immersion had some merit. As a result of such emphasis, my peers and I were able to become more quickly and successfully integrated into our new society. Our proficiency in English was a major factor in such success, and it led to

enhanced opportunities in education, work, and recreation – and ultimately in our being able to contribute in various ways to our adopted society. In effect, we thus succeeded but invariably at a price in terms of relationships with our parents and extended families. At times, from their perspectives the cost became even greater, as we not only lost our language but also married spouses from other ethnic or religious groups.

In his reflections on growing up in an Italian community in upstate New York, Jerry Mangione (1943) so aptly described our parents' feelings and our adaptive strivings:

*My mother's insistence that we speak only Italian at home drew a sharp line between our existence there and our life in the world outside. We gradually acquired the notion that we were Italian at home and American (whatever that was) elsewhere. Instinctively, we all sensed the necessity of adapting ourselves to two different worlds. We began to think that there were several marked differences between those worlds, differences that made Americans and my relatives each think of the other as foreigners. (p. 50)*



At about the same time as Mangione's book, Irvin Child (1943) published a sociopsychological study of the sons of Italian immigrants in New Haven, Connecticut.<sup>4</sup> Noting that these sons had been socialized under two different and incompatible cultures, Child found three types of reactions among them: most were *apathetic*, as they deemphasized the importance of their parents' nationality; others were characterized as *rebels*, who rejected membership in the Italian community and sought instead acceptance among Americans; and a few showed an *in-grouper* reaction, as they identified primarily with the Italian community. As might be expected, the Ital-

ian language remained of greatest importance to members of the latter group.<sup>5</sup>

Another critical issue concerns the relationship between language and one's identity<sup>6</sup>. In an earlier section I alluded to my sense of shame (almost) in speaking English with an accent, along with my conflict about my cultural identity as a newly immigrated adolescent. To whom does one turn in trying to cope with such feelings and conflicts, especially when one's parents are not (or do not seem to be) accessible? Social workers, teachers, and others can do much in this regard by being tuned into the young immigrant's feelings; by conveying their readiness to be of help; by striving to understand her or his culture; and by accepting her or his struggle as natural, perhaps inevitable, and typically growth producing. I could have used such help in determining my major in college. I was torn between English and psychology. The latter soon won, perhaps not only because of some rebellion against my original languages but also because the need to find and understand myself prevailed over my fascination with English.

### Conclusion

As social workers and teachers we can help parents from immigrant groups and the young persons themselves, to appreciate that our use of language is a reflection of a complex process, as it is intricately connected with one's psychosocial development and identity formation. In particular, an adolescent's rejection of the parents' native language can be a reflection of her or his strivings toward growth and individualization, somewhat like various rebellious behaviors evident in many families. Such rejection is usually a phase in the process toward adulthood, rather than a final event. It can represent the spontaneous behavior of an action-oriented person who is actively struggling with life challenges. Perhaps most important for many, rejection of the language is eventually replaced by mature

understanding, appreciation, and even pride and admiration for one's parents and ancestors. This is what I discovered as a young adult but never told my parents as they were by then deceased. Ah – if we could only relive crucial moments from our past!

### Notes

1. See Lopreato (1967) for an extensive sociological study of peasant society in the village in which I grew up – the group to which my family belonged. (The author is a relative on my maternal side and former professor of sociology at the University of Texas at Austin.)

2. There have been many studies of the loss of native language among immigrants, albeit typically from the perspective of second and third generations. See, for example, Alba, Logan, Lutz, and Stults (2002).

3. See Portes and Schaffer (1994) for discussion of bilingualism among second generation Americans.

4. Irvin Child was my academic advisor in college. Although I had read his study, we never talked about it – probably due to my then mixed feelings about my language and ancestry.

5. In recent visits with cousins who decades ago emigrated from our village to Australia, I found that they speak primarily our dialect while their Australian-born children speak the dialect at home and English elsewhere. Cronin (1970) has described the variations in language use among Sicilians in Australia, along with language-related conflicts between different generations.

6. See Bailey (2000) for consideration of language and ethnic/racial identity among Dominican Americans.

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