

Losing your parent's language

By Laura D'Amelio

When Oliviana Mingarelli visits her grandmother in Montreal, she admits she speaks “Frenchtalian”, a combination of French and Italian. For someone who can speak English, Italian, French and Spanish, mixing two languages or more comes easier than one might expect.



“If there was a word I could use for the combination of three languages, like neapolitan ice cream, I would describe our conversations that way too,” says Mingarelli 31, who notes that Spanish mixes with her Italian conversations often as well.

Mingarelli learned Italian and French at school and recently spent a year living in Spain. Her Italian, the language she spoke as a child with her parents and grandparents, who are originally from Rome, is no longer fluent. “Maybe if I had more roots with Italy, I would have felt a drive to keep my Italian up. I only have a few distant cousins there so I don’t feel like I’m missing out by not speaking Italian fluently.”

Recently, a BBC documentary followed descendants of immigrants as they struggled to learn their parent’s language and connect with their culture. Many of the young people featured felt disconnected from their heritage because they couldn’t communicate with extended family or function in their family’s country of origin.

The idea applies to descendants of immigrants in Canada as well. A 2011 Statistics Canada report showed that in 1981, 52% of children under 18 born in Canada to Italian immigrants spoke the same mother tongue as their mothers. By 2006, it was only 20%. It also showed the first generation of Italian-Canadians had 100% Italian language knowledge and use, the second generation had 52% language transmission and the third generation just 11%.

Historic texts and research, as well as recent studies, all point to language as a primary identifier of ethnicity and culture. Learning and maintaining a heritage language promotes group cohesion within ethnic communities and helps with “ethnic rediscovery” for individuals attempting to reconnect with their ethnicity.

“Any sociolinguist textbook would list language as the first identifier of ethnicity, so it is the most crucial connection to your heritage,” says Jana Vizumiller-Zocco an associate professor in the Department of Languages, Literatures and Linguistics at York University. “And yet young Italian-Canadians seem to live without the need to do that.”

“At the university we can hear students speaking Chinese and speaking Arabic, but we don’t hear students speaking Italian. Why is that? One possible answer is they speak a dialect so they have problems speaking to each other in a common Italian, or they don’t identify with it or they think they can’t speak it very well so they are ashamed of not knowing it very well.”

“I don’t speak Italian, but I wish I did,” says Steven Mirasola, 19, preparing for his first trip to Italy with his mother to meet his relatives in Calabria. “I went to Italian school until grade 2 or 3 but then swimming, hockey and soccer got in the way. I also haven’t had to use it. My grandparents speak English to me and if

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they do speak Italian I do understand it. But they also understand me if I speak English. So I've never really made the effort myself."

Jana also points out that if it is not spoken in the home, Italian will not be picked up by younger Italian-Canadians and won't be used in the community. Another concern is the effect of dialects. "The Italian language has so many dialects, it's rich in linguistic variety, but that's also a disadvantage because the Italians brought their own regional dialects with them," says Jana. "If you have too many variations, and you don't have one strong pull to one language, then you opt for English in a situation of immigration."

For Steven, learning Italian and French are goals of his for use here in Canada and for traveling. "For Italian, I also feel like it is part of my cultural duty to know the language that is part of my heritage."

In an online survey conducted by Panoram Italia, of 116 self-identified Italian-Canadians (those having a parent or grandparent who immigrated from Italy), Italian-Canadians aged 18-29 noted that they had less knowledge of Italian speaking, writing and reading capabilities than older generations. Of those proficient in Italian, 23% had learned the language in a school setting.

Of more interest is why Italian-Canadians keep their language skills. Among Italian-Canadians aged 45+, the most compelling reason (35.6% of respondents) to speak Italian was to connect with family and friends in Italy or other countries or for a job (11.9% of respondents). Those aged 30-45 and 18-29 saw Italian as useful to connect with family here in Canada (36% and 35% respectively).

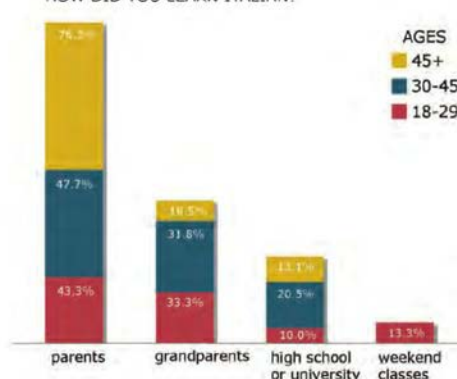
"I think there is a continuum of Italian-Canadians that range from those who opt for culture without language to those who are really fluent in the language, they go to Italy and they have daily contact with Italy so they keep up the language," says Jana. "But it's very difficult to generalize, we don't have any real studies on young Italian-Canadians and language."

Mingarelli, who was raised in the Ottawa area, says that even though her Italian is fading, she still feels connected to the Italian-Canadian community. "I grew up in that community and feel part of that community, not necessarily because I was born into the culture and could speak the language, but because I attended church, went to soccer games, went to Preston Street."

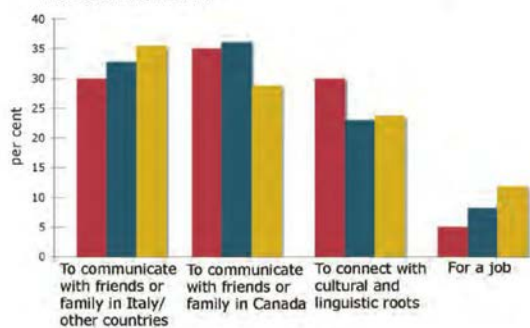
This is a common idea, agrees Jana. "In Canada, you can express your connection to Italians through other means; through food, through meeting to watch the soccer game, through other areas. On one hand, there is no support on the part of the community for young people activities in Italian and young people themselves don't seem to feel that they need to speak Italian to feel Italian."

In Canada, where functioning bilingually or trilingually is possible because of our cultural mosaic, language doesn't always equate to culture. "I've chosen to pick up Spanish because I think it has more uses for me right now, for professional reasons and the friends I have. But I've picked the language, not the culture," says Mingarelli. "When Italy played Spain in the Euro Cup, I cheered on Italy." ❖

HOW DID YOU LEARN ITALIAN?



WHAT IS YOUR TOP PRIORITY FOR LEARNING AND USING ITALIAN?



Online survey conducted by Panoram Italia from June 18 to June 25, 2012. Respondents self-identified as Italian-Canadians based on descending from a parent or grandparent who immigrated from Italy. 116 respondents total.

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