

Le voci degli italiani (Voices of Italians): The Linguistic Assimilation of Postwar Italian Immigrants in Argentina and Australia
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Following the economic devastation after World War II, many Italians became disillusioned by the lack of job opportunities in Italy and began to leave for Australia, Argentina, and the U.S., among other countries. Much research has been done into the experience of Italian immigrants in the U.S., with several historical accounts regarding this wave of immigration, but there are few specific anthropological efforts to explore the linguistic assimilation of these immigrants who were forced to learn Spanish and English to integrate into the societies of Argentina and Australia, respectively. Regarding this lack of concentrated research, I designed this summer research project to investigate the experiences of immigrants and their descendants as they assimilated to the languages and cultures of these new nations. I examined how the immigrants responded to the rules and regulations of the dominant languages in Australia and Argentina and to understand the language hierarchy (the relationship between the new, dominant language and the heritage language, Italian) that formed as a result.

To begin addressing these questions, I started by conducting a broad literature review to offer historical context to this specific wave of immigration. I researched the economic situation in Italy that led many people to leave, and I studied the political, linguistic, and racial histories of Argentina and Australia to understand the recent past of those nations and foreground my examination of the reception of Italian immigrants following World War II. Once I collected and worked through a variety of historical texts, I began writing notes and questions that I will utilize in the future during interviews. Overall, I consulted a wide range of sources, including books about Argentine, Australian, and Italian history for context to specific articles about linguistic assimilation, bilingualism, constructions of race, and identity. I have written reflections that tie the theoretical, anthropological concepts around linguistic identity to the events of this wave of Italian immigration to Australia and Argentina.

My family, of Italian and Latin American origins, has personal ties to this moment in history. My grandfather was 19 years old when World War II ended, and he had several older siblings who had already left Italy and begun new lives in Australia, Argentina, and the U.S. Eventually, he decided to settle in the U.S. himself, but I still have many cousins who live in Australia and Argentina. I conducted a preliminary interview with my mother to organize contact information, sketch a family tree, and develop a narrative background to frame future interviews. I plan to start interviewing these cousins and then receive contact information for more potential interview subjects from them. I am continuing this research as my Honors Project in Anthropology, and I hope to travel to Argentina over Winter Break to conduct follow-up interviews and, if possible, participant observation at cultural Italian heritage events.

These future ethnographic endeavors will build upon the literature review I conducted to create new insights around this wave of immigration. The specific reflections spurred by this project will ultimately lend itself to new findings regarding the general linguistic oppressions as experienced by various immigrant groups today, such as the Latinx population in the U.S., that must (in certain contexts) stop speaking Spanish and other native languages and adopt “standard English.” Consequently, this research will be generative in the inquiry into language as a tool of globalization and assimilation. I will contribute to this evaluation of globalization by examining the ways in which linguistic assimilation serves as an arm of the system.

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