

International Linguistic Association

Monthly Lecture Series

Saturday, March 4, 2023. 11 AM - 12 PM (EST)

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Multilingualism and heritage language practices amongst third generation Australian Italians

Abstract:

How and why are heritage languages (HLs) maintained and/or lost intergenerationally, particularly amongst the third generation? This presentation will address this question, focusing on the Italians in Australia, the second largest non-English speaking migrant group in terms of ancestry in this continent (ABS 2016). Scholarship on sociolinguistic processes in diasporic contexts has tended to pay attention to language maintenance/shift within the first and the second generation, while the third generation remain largely underresearched, including in the Italian diaspora, in spite of their growing numbers and their crucial role in long-term language maintenance. This is by and large due to the still influential view that by the third generation HLs tend to be lost, according to paradigms that adopt a fairly unidirectional perspective of migration and a linear view of language transmission (Fishman 2013). New reconceptualisations of migration as transnational mobility, closely connected with processes of globalisation (Blommaert 2010; Canagarajah 2017), make such approaches difficult to maintain. Therefore, recent studies in the diaspora pay increasing attention to complex language repertoires and language choices that both mobility and access to technology can bring about within our globalised societies, and more broadly also to the issue of language maintenance in diasporic contexts (Pauwels 2018). This, in turn, has led to increasing consideration for the linguistic practices of the third generation.

Drawing on such research, this talk will present a project that deals with the multilingualism of bi- (English, Italian) and trilingual (English, Italian and Dialect) third generation Australian Italians, aged 18 to 30. The data was gathered through an online survey and conversational interviews that deal with the participants' experiences with their HLs, both Italian and dialect. In the Italian context, dialects are not simply variations of standard Italian, the national language, but distinct languages. For Australian Italians, Italian and a (regional) dialect (e.g. Sicilian, Calabrian) are HLs because dialect was the first language of most post-war Italian migrants in Australia. Building on findings emerging from the online survey (Rubino 2021), this talk will explore the role that HLs play and/or have played in the lives of the young interviewees. It will focus on (a) their language learning trajectories and the major factors that have sustained (and/or impeded) their motivation to maintain and/or learn HLs; and (b) how and why third generation Australian Italians engage in language practices involving their HLs, including translanguaging (García & Li 2014).

As will be argued, for these young people HLs represent important semiotic resources within their complex repertoires, that they mobilise in specific circumstances and for particular functions. Furthermore, their multilingualism emerges as a dynamic condition that can change throughout life and contexts, pointing to new conceptualisations of language maintenance in diasporic contexts.

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Date & Time: March 4, 2023 at 11:00 AM Eastern Time (US and Canada)

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Antonia Rubino lectures in sociolinguistics, linguistics and language in the Department of Italian Studies at the University of Sydney, and has research interests in multilingualism, migration, and language education. She has conducted extensive research on the ecology of migrant languages and the dynamics whereby they used and changed across generations. Her work has focused on the Italo-Australian community and on the linguistic practices of first, second and third generation Australian Italians in a range of social contexts, and on the intergenerational transmission of both Italian and dialect.

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