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The Vitality of Italian as a Heritage Language in the United States

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ABSTRACT: This article is a first attempt to analyze the vitality of the Italian language in the U.S. according to three parameters: *Capacity, Opportunity and Desire:* a model proposed by Lo Bianco and Kreeft Peyton (2013). After defining the meaning of Heritage Language and of vitality of a language, the study describes the model and applies its parameters to the status of the Italian language in the U.S. The vitality of Italian as a Heritage Language in the U.S. has various implications both at the sociological level and at the level of language policy as well as educational language policy. The latter area is of specific interest to the present study.

Heritage Language: A Challenging Definition

The terms Heritage Language (HL), Heritage Language Speaker (HLS) and Heritage Language Learner (HLL) are now in widely used, but scholars have yet to find an unambiguous and thoroughly agreed definition of their meaning. This is also because:

> the concept [...] is sensitive to a variety of interpretations within social, political, regional and national contexts. Furthermore, the connotations vary depending on one's disciplinary perspective (Van Deusen-Scholl 2003: 212).[1]

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[1] See also Trifonas and Aravossitas (2018) for an introduction to the terms mentioned and a historical survey of scientific research on these issues.

The definition given by *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics* is evidence of the difficulty and complexity in achieving a shared meaning. According to the encyclopedia, the first use of the term dates to the Canadian context, meaning essentially a language spoken by indigenous people (First Nation) or immigrants (Cummings 1991). As a more general definition, the encyclopedia also describes a Heritage Language as "the language used in the domestic or family context" (King and Ennser-Kananen 2013). Another very broad definition is Kelleher's (2010) according to which the term can be used to refer to a certain familiarity, a certain kind of bond

> between a non-dominant language and a person, family, or community (p. 1).[2]

When referring to the U.S. context, Fishman speaks of "any language of personal relevance other than English" (Fishman 1999 cited by Van Deusen-Scholl 2003: 216). Fishman then specifies further by saying:

> [...] we define heritage languages as those that (a) are LOTE (Languages Other Than English) [...] and that (b) have special familial relevance to learners [...] (Fishman 2001: 81).

He divides the heritage languages in the U.S. into three broad categories:

- indigenous,
- colonial and
- immigrant languages (Fishman 2001: 81).

He defines as indigenous the languages spoken by Native Americans, those that are still the most marginalized and at risk. By colonial Fishman identifies the languages of early settler groups, such as Dutch, Swedish, Finnish, Spanish, French and German. Some of these have now disappeared as heritage languages, but even languages such as Spanish and French, as colonial heritage languages, have not survived the

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[2] The same definition is adopted by Berardi - Wilthshire (2009: 38) and Bonfatti Sabbioni (2018:16).

can claim significant intergenerational mother tongue transmission. There it holds an uninterrupted tradition of heritage language community life and of heritage schooling (2001: 84).

The third Group is defined as Immigrant Heritage Languages where all the languages of people who have come to the U.S. relatively more recently are included, from those most present, such as Spanish, French, Italian, Chinese, Arabic, Russian, etc., to those less widespread and confined, such as Somali, Korean, Vietnamese, etc. Fishman points out that such languages have rarely been regarded as a national resource.

passage of generations, says Fishman.[3] Only German in Pennsylvania, according to the scholar,

Bonfatti Sabbioni places all these definitions within a sociopolitical perspective to which she flanks a linguistic perspective for which:

> […] the term refers to the internally constructed other language in the mind of bilingual speakers, aurally acquired in naturalistic environment and primarily used by family members within the family context (2018: 16).

Relevant for the purpose of this research is the definition given by Cho, Cho and Tse (1997) which fits well with a certain proportion of third- or fourth-generation Americans of Italian descent. For them a heritage language is:

> […] the language associated with one's cultural background and it may or may not be spoken at home (p. 106).

But experts' doubts and concern focus precisely on the use of the term *heritage*. Baker and Jones (1998: 509) cited from Wiley (2001: 29) and Van Deusen-Scholl (2003: 21) write:

> The danger of the term "heritage language" is that, relative to powerful majority languages, it points more to the past and less to the future, to traditions rather than to the contemporary. The danger is that the heritage language becomes associated with ancient cultures, past traditions and more "primitives times". This is also true of the

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[3] In fact, Fishman states that the prevalent presence of Spanish in the U.S. is due to recent immigration and therefore not traceable to the early settlers. (2001: 84).

terms "ethnic" (used in the USA) and "ancestral". These terms may fail to give the impression of a modern, international language that is of value in a technological society.[4]

The term could thus be interpreted as negative, offensive, or counterproductive (Van Deusen-Scholl 2003: 216). The scholar also points out that the use of the term for certain languages and in certain contexts could demean the value of the language itself. For example, in the U.S. languages such as Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, etc. could be interpreted only as Heritage Languages, reducing their importance and value as languages of international strengths. Thus, it may occur that in a context such as the U.S. some languages may be considered as "less valuable and lower in status than English" (Van Deusen-Scholl 2001: 217). Or they may be considered not only of lesser value but even inappropriate for historical and political reasons, as was the case with the German in the U.S. during World War I and Italian, German, and Japanese during World War II.[5] All these negative conditions encouraged a desire for assimilation that sometimes led individuals and communities to want to forget their ties to the language of origin. But alternative terms can also give a limited, incorrect, or biased definition. Van Deusen Scholl (2003) points out, for example, that the use of the term "Language for native speakers" sometimes used to refer to courses for Heritage Students can give rise to misunderstandings about the actual language proficiency of students. Students themselves may be the first to interpret the term native speaker inconsistently and in an inappropriate way.

Terminology varies according to the contexts being analyzed. For example, the Council of Europe uses specific definitions for Regional, Minority or Migration Language, but Home Language and Language of Origin are also used. In

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[4] Baker and Jones refer specifically to Canada, but the quote may also have more general value.

[5] See Dolci (2018). Unfortunately, there are many other examples of conflicts fought also with languages, including very recent ones like the war in Yugoslavia in 1990 and the current war in Ukraine. See also Shell (2001).

Canada the term Aboriginal or First Nation Languages is also commonly applied; in Australia the term Community Language is also employed.[6]

Reflection on the meanings conveyed by the term Heritage Language is flanked by that on those who speak the language and/or want to study it for the reasons discussed above: the Heritage Speaker and the Heritage Language Learner.

From a sociological perspective the Heritage speaker can be defined the child of immigrants born in the host country o who arrived there in their early childhood. While from a linguistic point of view, heritage speakers are defined as "heterogeneous subpopulation of multi-linguals" (Scontras et al. 2015: 16).[7] As a result, the definition of Heritage Language Learner also carries with it a complexity of meanings and nuances that attests to the variety of contexts and situations. Wiley (2001) states:

> […] the elasticity of the term Heritage Language Learner raises a number of questions related to the politics of identity. For example, who can be considered a legitimate heritage language learner? Should "outsiders" to the heritage language be encouraged to learn it? Which is more important in determining "outsiders" or "insiders" status: language proficiency or ethnicity? (p. 30).

Or, we might add here, some other "heritage" aspect that binds a person in some way to a certain language and motivates him or her to learn it. For example, a bond that is more cultural, motivational, and identitarian than linguistic.

This is of fundamental value as it addresses the issue of language education: a key point for any discourse on the vitality or revitalization of a language in a context in which it does not have the status of an official or dominant language.

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[6] In the U.S., the debate over the choice of non-discriminatory terms is also evidenced by the increasing use of the term world languages instead of foreign languages. In addition, many people, given their more or less strong ties, may consider a language more familiar than foreign, even if they possess very partial competence, or only cultural, community or family connections (Kelleher 2010).

[6] Both quotes are taken from Bonfatti Sabbioni (2018: 17).

Indeed, just as Wiley uses the term "elasticity" for Heritage Lerner, many other scholars use expressions such as "heterogeneous group" (Van Deusen-Scholl 2003: 221), "extremely diverse group" (King and Ennser-Kananen 2013), etc.

According to Valdes (2001) the Heritage Language Student – and the Heritage Language Speaker –:

> […] is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speaks or only understand the Heritage Language, and who have some proficiency in English and the Heritage Language (p. 39).

Such individuals can be called bilinguals, meaning by bilingualism a dynamic concept in which competence in both languages lies on a continuum and varies from a perfect balance to a very partial competence in one of the two (Valdés 2001: 39).

Many scholars point out that language proficiency in Heritage Language is not a major deciding factor in defining "Heritage Speaker" and "Heritage Language Learner". The "Heterogeous Group" mentioned by Van Deusen-Scholl (2001) cited earlier includes:

> […] fluent native speakers to non-speakers who may be generations removed but who may culturally connected to the language (p. 221).[8]

The scholar also distinguishes between Heritage Learners and "Learners with a heritage motivation". Valdés (2001) points out that:

> […] it is the historical and personal connection to the language that is salient and not the actual proficiency of individual speakers (p. 38).

According to Kondo Brown (2003: 1):

> from the 'personal' perspective of an individual leaner, whether or not one may view his or her ancestral language as Heritage Learner

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[8] See also Polinsky and Kagan (2007) for a definition of Heritage Speaker language competence that also takes into account the Heritage Learner's distance from the "standard" Heritage Language.

seems to depend on the degree of association one establishes between one's own identity and the ancestral language.

In conclusion, Scalera (2003: 1) suggests that a Heritage Language Learner is:

> […] someone who has a personal emotional connection to a language other than English. Somewhere in their personal histories there is a link to that language that is important (Beraldi Wilthshire (2009: 40).

Therefore, "the motivation of HLL is universally recognized as one of the key elements distinguishing them from other types of language learners." as Berardi Whilshire (2009: 44) points out. We will see below how motivation is also crucial within the COD model where it plays a key role in revitalizing a Heritage Language.

Italian can be considered a heritage language in many contexts. Because of the social, political, and economic history of speakers of the Italian language abroad, from the merchants of the Middle Ages opening headquarters in Mediterranean ports to the migration waves of the last century and more recent international mobility. All forming communities of people of Italian origin abroad.

But each context is its own case. And this uniqueness may depend on many factors: historical, economic, political, social. In some cases when the migration wave ended long ago, the speech community has become so assimilated that Italian is but a distant memory. In these contexts, if a bond has remained, it is certainly not linguistic. Other communities, on the other hand, continue to maintain a very strong link with Italy that makes them very active even in trying to maintain or foster knowledge of the language also in second or third generations. But even within the same communities there are very different situations, which even make one question the very existence of a community that shares interests or goals, which many times depend only on family or even individual choices.

The presence, strength and thus vitality of the Italian language abroad thus depend on numerous factors. A key role is played by the very status accorded it by the institutions that determine a nation's language and educational policies. For

example, whether such policies promote multilingualism or instead push for linguistic and cultural assimilation. Whether Italian is required as a compulsory "foreign" language in schooling, or whether it is not even included. If it is even considered among the official languages of a country. If the country is geographically close to Italy and there is an almost daily exchange between the communities, reinforced by historical and economic ties. Or, conversely, if historical and political relations are deteriorating or conflicting. If it is spoken only in the family or has a prestigious status in other broader social contexts as well. Whether the presence of a community of speakers of Italian origin is centered in one part of the territory, or whether it is scattered and disunited, etc.

Many scholars have addressed these issues by analyzing all contexts in which Italian is a non-dominant language and is spoken by a more or less strong community. The literature on these issues is now extensive.[9] For the U.S. context, which is what we are interested in here, we cite only the works of Haller (1973), Carnevale (2009), Milione and Gambino (2009), De Fina and Fellin (2010), De Fina (2014) and references mentioned there.

We have seen how complex the field of inquiry is and how it depends on the context in which these definitions apply. In this article we will focus on the United States where time and history have influenced the concept of the community of individuals of Italian descent and consequently their relationship to the Italian language. Therefore, we will ask whether Italian can still be considered a heritage language according to the definitions we have presented in this section. Using the COD model, we will analyze its vitality, and more importantly, try to identify strategic lines for its possible revitalization.

But before we turn to the specific context of our interest, we still need to better define what can be meant by the vital-

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[9] We mention here only the work of Vedovelli (2011), which, in addition to gathering the contributions of scholars on specific areas, also attempts to find connections and common features.

ity of a language and, subsequently, what is the COD model we intend to measure and materialize it.

Do We Mean by the Vitality of a language?

By vitality of a language, we mean the health and strength of a language in a certain context. As Berruto (2016: 11) points out:

> Parlare di 'vitalità di una lingua' significa perciò concepire la lingua, sia pure metaforicamente, come un organismo vivente, e significa riferirsi al fatto di quanto una lingua sia piena di energia, di forza. Si tratta quindi tipicamente di una metafora biologica.ity of a language and, subsequently, what is the COD model we intend to use to measure and revitalize it.

Strength and vitality depend on various factors: the number of speakers, in what social, media, work domains it is used, whether it is taught in schools, whether publications the language are readily available and how widely disseminated they are, etc.

These indicators do not have a binary, yes/no value but their presence or absence can be put on a scale. Therefore, we can talk about the grading of vitality. Quoting Berruto (2016: 11) again, we can say that:

> Vitale in questo senso è anche un aggettivo intrinsecamente graduabile, si può essere estremamente vitali, molto vitali, abbastanza vitali, poco vitali, per niente vitali, ecc.

This concept is also related to the endangerment of a language. This concept has emerged since the 1990s, both in the professional field and among the general public, when there was an awareness of the value of a language and the culture it conveys. Both go hand in hand with the richness and respect of biological diversity. We talk about respect and conservation of animal and plant species and their importance to the whole ecosystem, as we talk about the conservation of a language and its culture.[10]

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[10] In fact, not surprisingly, an ecological approach to the study of languages and language learning has simultaneously emerged (Van Lier 2006).

This brought many scholars to propose scales to measure the degree of danger and consequently the degree of vitality of a language itself.[11] It can be measured from two perspectives, one referring to linguistic forms and structures, which Berruto (2016) calls "internal" vitality, and one referring to the uses of the language by the community of speakers, which he calls "external" vitality (p. 12-13). Berruto (2016) calls "internal" vitality, and one referring to the uses of the language by the community of speakers, which he calls "external" vitality (p. 12-13).

Fishman (1991), for example, proposed a Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) divided into 8 grades where grade 1 represents the maximum vitality of a language, when it "is used in education, work, mass media, government at the nationwide level." While Grade 8 represents the most at-risk grade for a language when "the only remaining speakers of the language are members of the grandparent generation."

Since its inception UNESCO has always had as its goal the preservation of cultural and linguistic diversity, and since the early 1990s it has initiated a series of specific research projects with the goal of saving endangered languages. In 2003 the organization commissioned a group of scholars to draft a scale to measure the degree of endangerment, and thus also to measure the degree of vitality, for a language. The result is the Language Vitality and Endangerment (LVE) index (UNESCO 2003, Brezinger 2007 p. X). The index measures the grade of endangerment passing from "safe", where "The language is spoken by all generations; intergenerational transmission is uninterrupted" to "critically endangered" where "The youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently" to "extinct", when there are no longer people who can speak or understand it. Language is placed on the scale based on the analysis of various indicators, including the number of speakers,

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[11] For a discussion and the comparison of the various tools and approaches, see Lo Bianco (2014).

presence in the media, government and institutional attitudes about the language itself, intergenerational transmission, and domains of use.

As interest around the topic grows and with the results of applying these scales to more and more contexts, scholars continue to refine them and propose new ones. Lewis and Simons (2010) propose an expanded GIDS scale, called EGIDS (Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale) in which it increases to 13 from the original 8 levels of Fishman's scale. The scale not only indicates the degree of endangerment, but also contains indicators to assess the level of revitalization, such as whether "A second generation of children are acquiring the language from their parents" or whether "Adults are rediscovering their language for symbolic and identification purposes" (Lewis and Simons 2010: 117).[12]

The choice of one tool or another cannot be random or interchangeable. Lo Bianco (2014) reviews some of the research tools and approaches that have been developed and used in recent years. The resulting picture shows that each tool has an approach and consequently a theory of reference associated with it. The general goal of maintaining and fostering the development of multilingualism, is common to all research, but the use of one tool or another depends on the context in which it is to be used and, above all, on the goal one wants to achieve. For example, whether one wants to identify only the endangerment factors or whether one wants to identify the elements in which to invest to attempt language revitalization.

Concerning the latter goal, Lo Bianco (2014: 59) notes that approaches that aim at revitalization and maintenance fall into two broad areas: ecological and sociolinguistic-economic. Ecological approaches tend to view language and culture as living organisms and focus on the damage that the extinction of a language and culture would bring to the whole eco-

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[12] The use of the EGIDS scale is now widespread and has also been adopted by *Ethnologue.*

system in terms of cultural linguistic and biological diversity. Thus, placing the goal of revitalization of a language and culture within a network of holistic relationships with other biological systems in which the maintenance of a language and culture also supports the maintenance of balance among all eco-systems and thus their survival.

Sociolinguistic-economic approaches, on the other hand, focus on a specific context, leaving the relationship with the "global" ecosystem in the background. They analyze its relationship of language and culture to socioeconomic aspects: the prestige and power of language and culture, relative to others and to the dominant language in various domains. Central to this is the value placed on the role of language and educational policies pursued by institutions in developing multilingual and pluricultural competencies. Thus, language revitalization is also of importance in the fields of business and market, politics, and diplomacy, and, of course, in the various social, communicative, and educational domains (Lo Bianco 2014: 59-60).

The COD Model

The model we will use here to analyze the vitality of Italian as Heritage Language in the U.S. was developed by Grin (1990, 2003) and then later by Grin and Vaillancourt (1998) and Lo Bianco (2008).[13]

The model differs from many others because it was not designed to describe or measure the endangered status of a language, but rather was developed as a tool to identify a revitalization strategy. For this very reason, many governments or supranational institutions have adopted it for promoting the use of minority or regional languages. In fact, the model has been tested to carry out Welsh and Basque, Maori, and Irish revitalization campaigns, and has served as a framework for the European Charter for Regional or Minority Lan-

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[13] To describe the framework, we will follow Lo Bianco (2013) to whom we refer for insights and reference bibliography.

guages prepared by the Council of Europe (Lo Bianco 2013). The application on different and numerous contexts provided a lot of data that consequently allowed the framework to be refined and to verify its effectiveness to. A stress test that makes it a particularly robust model.

Its dissemination and subsequent popularity among government institutions that have chosen to adopt it is a testimony to its ability to adjust well to the work of both language experts and language policy makers. It provides them with factual operational tools and the opportunity to compare them with each other to assess their effectiveness. It is thus a model that "assists communities and governments in responding in a coherent and empirically testable way" (Lo Bianco 2013: ii) in the effort to support endangered languages. The COD model ranks among sociolinguistic-economic approaches in that it considers those economic, social, communicative, and educational domains in which language is used.

A central idea in the COD model is to distinguish between those conditions that are necessary to foster language use in language revival contexts and those that are sufficient to produce increased language use. (Lo Bianco 2013: ii)

In particular, the model emphasizes that to revitalize a language an effective strategy must target the educational domain, ensuring language teaching in schools, (Capacity Development) but also the communicative domain, ensuring spontaneous and real use in the economic, social and mass media domains (Opportunity creation). This can foster the development of motivation as an engine for active language study and use (Desire Enhancement). These three components represent the legs on which the revitalization intervention rests and give the model its name: *Capacity, Opportunity, Desire* (COD). To define these three aspects, we use the words of Lo Bianco himself (2013: iii-vi)

Capacity in a language refers to the level of proficiency in the language that is developed through formal teaching and informal transmission of the language. […]

Opportunity creation, in the most general terms, creation involves development of and access to domains in which

use of the language is natural, welcome, and expected. […]

Desire involves subjective dispositions of learners - motivation and behavioral activity from them, such as the investment of time, energy, or resources in learning the language, either because proficiency in it brings material rewards or because of a subjective desire to be associated with and active within its community of speakers.

It is essential for the model that all three components are involved as they are equally important to ensure its success., Lo Bianco (2014: 60) points out that:

> When these conditions for success are separated by researchers or applied individually or with disproportionate focus by policy makers or communities, the necessary conditions for language use are absent. However, when copresent and pursued as a mutually reinforcing ensemble of recovery actions, COD forges a sufficient basis for language use and revitalization.

It is often preferred to invest in the educational aspect believing that this is also effective in encouraging the creation of opportunities outside the classroom and thus stimulates spontaneous and authentic language use in the various domains. This fosters the development of the motivational component and in turn fuels language study. But to trigger such a virtuous circle, the intervention must not be focused on just one leg of the table-to keep the metaphor going-but on the three of them, otherwise the real risk is an imbalance that would make everything unstable and thus ineffective.

After applying the model to different minority or regional languages, Lo Bianco decided to propose its application to languages that are not, but which, in certain situations become so, such as a context like the U.S. In the U.S., languages such as French, Spanish, German or Russian cannot only be defined as minority languages, but precisely because of the history of their presence in the U.S., they fall under Heritage Languages. Thus, the purpose of the research project that is presented in the 2013 special issue of Heritage Language Journal is to use the COD framework:

> […] as a guide for examining the vitality of languages spoken in the United States as "heritage languages which are spoken by individuals who have home, community and intergenerational connec-

tions with the languages as well some proficiency in them (Lo Bianco 2013: i).

The goal is to make scholars and the public aware "of the richness of language use patterns in the United States" and to foster a "more balanced approach to language learning and use" (Lo Bianco 2013: viii).

The purpose of Lo Bianco and the other contributors to the issue is thus to provide institutions in charge of language, educational and promotional policy with the tools so that students will:

> not only learn the language they are taught but also [will] be inspired to identify with it, and with themselves as future secure and competent users of the language, as bilingual or multilingual Americans (Lo Bianco 2013: viii).

The Application of the COD Model to Italian in the U.S.

In this contribution we will apply the COD model to Italian as a Heritage Language in the U.S. context, thus analyzing it in terms of Capacity Development, Opportunity Creation and Desire Enhancement. Again, the intent is to provide stakeholders with a set of useful tools to foster the use of Italian for authentic and real purposes in the social and communicative domains and thus motivate its study. We hope that the results of the analysis will activate a virtuous circle that will make the use and study of Italian in the U.S. increasingly popular.

According to U.S. Census in 2021, about 16 million people declared an Italian ancestry, but only about 560,000 claim to speak Italian at home. What is interesting is that while the figure for those who speak Italian at home has been systematically declining for many years, the number of people declaring Italian ancestry is more or less constant, in fact slightly increasing from previous surveys. For example, in 1980 1,618,344 people claimed to speak Italian at home and in 2019 the number dropped to 539,546, 66.7 percent less. While in 1990 14,664,189 people declared an Italian ancestry in 2021, they were 15, 947, 138. As De Fina (2014: 127) notes, many scholars dispute the way the Census collected the figure. In fact, it does not distinguish between Italian and

dialect, and asks whether Italian is spoken "at home" and not in general. In this regard, De Fina cites Milione and Gambino (2009) whose research hypothesizes that there are about 2.8 million speakers of Italian in the United States. Even the two researchers admit, however, that there is a sharp decline, especially in young people.

Nevertheless, Italian in the U.S. falls under all the definitions that have been given of Heritage Language by the scholarly literature and which we have briefly summarized in the first paragraph of this paper. But because of the history of the Italian diaspora in the U.S. many of the nuances identified by scholars in attempting to classify a language as a Heritage Language apply to Italian. As a result of this history, the label of Heritage Language for Italian undergoes many variations on the diachronic axis: the definition of Heritage Language that could be given to Italian in the 1920s or 1930s certainly cannot be the same as that of the 1990s, or of our own day. Both for social and linguistic reasons. While Italian continues to be spoken at home, albeit less and less, outside there are even fewer opportunities to use it. Communities of Americans of Italian descent are now almost everywhere scattered or survive only with a folkloric aspect.

Also, when there were many communities of people of Italian descent, the Italian that was spoken outside the family could be very different from the Italian that was spoken at home, which was more than likely a dialect. But even the Italian spoken outside the home was very different from what can be defined as standard or what Polonsky and Kagan (2007) define as "baseline language". In this regard, Haller (1993) speaks of a variety of Italian lingua franca, which developed among immigrants to communicate outside the inner circle formed by family members or fellow countrymen or co-regional speakers. And the possibility of speaking this kind of lingua franca has also changed a great deal over time, due to the assimilation process that has led to reduced opportunities to transfer the language intergenerationally and thus to speak it at home and fewer and fewer opportunities to be able to speak it in communities. The use of Italian has certainly suffered from identification with something primitive,

archaic, and sometimes even improper or even dangerous as during World War II when it had become "The enemy's language."

Even the definition of Italian Heritage Speakers is rather "elastic". They are definitely a "heterogeneous Group" (Van Deusen 2003) and are divided between outsiders and insiders in the terms used by Wiley (2001): their language proficiency varies widely and for the American of Italian descent the question of whether language proficiency or ethnicity matters more has no unambiguous answer. may help to clearly describe the situation of the heritage speaker of Italian in the U.S. Polonsky and Kagan's (2007) statement,

> despite the appearance of great variation among heritage speakers, they fall along a continuum based upon the speakers' distance from the baseline language.[14]

may help to describe clearly the situation of the heritage speaker of Italian in the U.S.

It is therefore difficult to present an uncontroversial definition of Italian in the U.S. as a Heritage Language and to identify a single Heritage speaker figure. With this caveat in mind, however, in the next few paragraphs we will try to apply the COD model to Italian in the US. The demographics we have seen above show that there is certainly a need for its revitalization, and so we hope that the application of the model will provide insights into what strategies may be needed.

Capacity Development

The definition of *Capacity Development* in Brin and Lo Bianco's model focuses on the notion of linguistic-communicative competence.[15] A language lives if one can read it,

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[14] For an in-depth analysis from a sociological and linguistic point of view of Italian in the U.S., we refer to the bibliography indicated above.

[15] Therefore, it would perhaps be more appropriate to speak of Competence Development, which we also feel is more accurate from an educational linguistics point of view.

write it and communicate with it, and it can be consequently revitalized if more and more people attain a sufficient degree of competence to exercise these skills. So, through educational institutions: courses offered by schools and colleges and by public or private associations or institutions. As Lo Bianco points out, it very often happens that institutions entrusted with language-education policy believe that capacity (or competence) development is the crucial, and sometimes the only, aspect to invest in to promote language use. In contrast, the large-scale application of the COD model has extensively demonstrated that, although necessary, the development of communicative language competence in the language to be revitalized is needed but not yet sufficient (Lo Bianco 2013: iii). Even for the promotion of the Italian language in the U.S., language-education policy has focused from the beginning on formal offerings in schools and colleges, but the results are not totally convincing and the return in investment does not seem to have paid off as hoped. Or at least that is what the numbers seem to suggest.[16]

For example, in 2008 only 2 percent of elementary schools and 4 percent of public secondary schools in the U.S. offered Italian language courses (Rhodes and Pufahl 2009). While ACTFL reported that at the K-12 level there were 78,273 Italian language learners in the 2007-2008 school year, concentrated in 18 states (ACFL 2011). More recently, MLA in its periodic report reported that there were 56,743 Italian language learners in colleges in 2016. The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAECI) in its 2017 white paper reports that there are about 36,000 school students and 69,449 university students. Students from Italian Cultural Institutes, various private centers or associations of Americans of Italian descent, and the Dante Alighieri Society must be added to these, for a total of 203,928 students of Italian in the U.S. in 2017.[17]

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[16] For a historical overview of linguistic-educational policies on Italian language promotion in the U.S., see Dolci (2018), De Fina (2014).

[17] One of the problems with analyzing the diffusion of Italian language teaching in the U.S. at the K-12 level is unfortunately the lack of reliable or recent data. In fact, as we can see, the data date back to

Additional data that can help take a snapshot of the state of formal Italian language offerings in the U.S. comes from the Advanced Placement Italian Language and Culture Exam of the College Board and the National Italian Exam offered by AATI. The number of students taking the AP exam each year approximates 2,500 students. In contrast, in recent years the number of NIEs taken by students is around 6,000.[18]

The numbers, although with the cautions explained in the note regarding comparability and reliability, seem to show that an intervention focused on increasing educational offerings does not seem to be fully effective. However, we can ask whether it has at least been beneficial for Capacity (Competence) Development, that is, for improving students' language-communication competence. The available data are very partial and cannot provide a sure answer, but some indications, however, seem to be negative in this respect as well. One such data is provided by the MLA reports, and it concerns the attendance of advanced level courses. It is evident from the 2009, 2013, and 2016 MLA reports that only one in 10 students in elementary level Italian language courses continue to advanced courses (MLA 2019: 30). The reasons for this situation may be many and by itself the figure says little, but nonetheless it is an indication of a certain difficulty of Italian. Moreover, the 1:10 ratio is the lowest among foreign languages, further demonstrating the difficulty in "student retention". The second figure concerns the scores obtained by students taking the AP Italian Language and Culture Exam. As is well known, the exam, and the related course that precedes it, is college-level and is taken by HS students who want to earn college credit. So, it is most likely that the top stu-

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2008. The most recent survey done by various institutions including ACTFL, CAL, MLA and ACIE, dates to 2017, but inexplicably Italian was not considered. This lack of reliable and recent data prevents the possibility of effectively monitoring the status of Italian language in the US in schools and implementing effective interventions accordingly.

[18] See Dolci (2020) for a discussion of the AP Italian Language and Culture Exam data.

dents are the ones who register for the course and take the exam. The exam score is given on a scale ranging from 1 to 5 with 3 being the threshold score for earning credit. On average, about 70 percent of students pass the exam. But only less than 20 percent, get the top grade of 5. Even these data therefore, while partial and very circumscribed, show that investing primarily in educational offerings gives no guarantee of either an increase in people using Italian or an increase in Capacity (Competence) Development in Italian.

We have very quickly described the educational offerings of the Italian language in the U.S. without limiting the description to Italian as a Heritage Language. For a language to be Heritage Language there must be a Heritage Language Learner, according to the definitions we presented earlier. It is therefore necessary to identify the profile of the learner of Italian in the U.S. and to understand whether he or she falls within that of the Heritage Language Learner.

In 2010, the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute launched a survey of high school students to identify the profile of the student of Italian. The questions were aimed at understanding what the motivations are in choosing the language, whether it is used and where, and the ethnicity of the student. More than six thousand students respond to the questionnaire. About 10 percent of the entire student population, according to the 2008 ACTFL survey. Thus, the sample is representative. Some of the survey data are analyzed in Dolci (2017). They report that about 60 percent of the students in the sample say they are of Italian origin, that Italian is spoken at home "sometimes" and "rarely" by 30 percent of the families, while for 3.3 percent of the sample, Italian is the language commonly used in the family. In addition, 15 percent of parents and about 37 percent of grandparents speak Italian. Those who declare themselves Italian American use Italian outside the classroom not only at home, but also with friends, and online. Thus, demonstrating that a real, and virtual, community related to Italian as a Heritage Language continues to exist.

Another interesting finding is the geographic distribution of schools where Italian courses are offered at the K-12 level.

As might be expected, the density is highest in states with the highest presence of Americans of Italian descent.[19]

These data are also confirmed by the population sample of students who enroll in the AP Italian Language and Culture Program and take the exam. About two-thirds of the courses and exams, hence of the students, are concentrated in the states of New York and New Jersey, historically those with the largest presence of Americans of Italian ancestry; the rest, is distributed, although unevenly, in states where there is nonetheless a presence of people declaring Italian ancestry. A final data point that confirms this situation is that about one-third on average of AP Italian students report that they "regularly speak or hear Italian" (Dolci 2021).

Therefore, we can conclude that there is a "Heritage Language Learner of Italian" and it is still well in existence; indeed, in many contexts the teaching of Italian is enacted and lives on thanks to Heritage Language Learners and their families who promote it in schools in the areas where they live.[20] Interestingly, in these contexts, interest in the Italian language expands and involves other ethnic groups as well. Demonstrating the promotional work, direct or indirect, done by Heritage Italian Language Learners and their families.[21]

Opportunity Creation

To be truly effective, the study of the Italian language learned outside the classroom, in authentic and real contexts,

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[19.] A database of schools where Italian is taught is available at www.usspeaksitalian.org.

[20] But more could certainly be done. It may be significant to recall that the number of students of Italian in 2008 at the k-18 level was about 10 percent of those who declared speaking Italian at home and 0.5 percent of those who declared an Italian ancestry.

[21] The analysis made here considers the Heritage Language Learner and not the Heritage Language Speaker. Understandably, the reality is very complex and the profiles of these two identities are very different from each other and within themselves. There is a very extensive bibliography on the subject for further study. See, for example, Milione and Gambino (2009) and Serra (2017) and the references cited there.

for purposes and activities recognized as important and motivating in people's lives. Without frequent use the language competence laboriously achieved in the classroom is easily lost, and without real opportunities to use the language the very motivation to use it diminishes. It is certainly not possible to think of providing opportunities to use language for all the most common social activities, as is the case if one lives in the country where the language is dominant, but it is still necessary to take advantage of all the opportunities that exist and to increase, as far as possible, the opportunities for language use even in a context where it is not dominant.

In many countries such occasions are very limited, given the predominance of an "official" language, and are in any case very much tied to very specific places, where one or more languages have equal status, otherwise the opportunities to be able to use the language remain confined to the family or to micro-communities that gather, usually, mainly in cities.

Opportunities to speak Italian in the U.S. have also changed dramatically over the years. Whereas in the early decades of the last century Little Italies made it possible to live comfortably with almost no knowledge of English, there were numerous Italian-language periodicals and newspapers, and radio stations that spoke Italian (La Gumina et al 2000), as time has gone on these opportunities have drastically reduced or even disappeared, making it very difficult to use Italian "into the wild". Polinsky and Kagan 2007; Lo Bianco 2013: v also point out how it is very difficult to recreate such opportunities to revitalize language use without creating "artificial" situations.

It is true, however, that while many opportunities have diminished, new ones have emerged, such as the use of the Internet and social and video platforms. In the 2010 survey, Italian students had reported on the use of Italian in social, in communities that, although virtual, represent an everyday reality for all young people, where "authentic" and "real" communicative tasks take place. There are numerous websites, or apps and chats where the language used is predominantly Italian. Where, moreover, people from all over the world meet, Heritage Speakers or not, people living in Italy, whether native speakers or not, etc... More and more teachers and stu-

dents are creating social groups where they continue to interact in Italian about non-"school" activities. The web also offers endless opportunities to listen to music, read newspapers, watch videos in the original language, etc. Video platforms offer the opportunity to watch Italian movies and series with or without subtitles, TV websites provide access to Italian programs and program archives from around the world.

Other opportunities arise within bilingual programs. Lo Bianco (2013: v) points out that the provision of such programs can provide opportunities for authentic use, both in the classroom, such as in learning other subjects, and in the school, in interactions with other students in other classes and with teachers, and in extracurricular activities organized by the school itself. Even in the United States, in major cities, there is a growth in the offerings of bilingual Italian programs that can provide more opportunities for language use.

From this brief excursus, any intervention to revitalize Italian in the U.S. cannot be separated from a careful study of existing opportunities for its use. Then intervention strategies can be developed, in coordination with the educational program offerings, that will create new opportunities. It is our view that such strategies should, however, involve all stakeholders, from teachers to families and especially the students themselves. In fact, it may happen that a top-down intervention, such as the creation of a site intended as a meeting space -expensive in economic, organizational, and managerial terms- turns out to be much more artificial, not real, and consequently not very effective, than a simple chat created and managed "for fun" but with passion, by a group of students and their teacher.

Desire Enhancement

In the COD model, the third leg that must hold up any language revitalization project is motivation (Desire). Motivation has always been considered a key element in achieving a goal. As Lo Bianco (2013: vi) points out, certainly the most "individual" and subjective one, and therefore also the most difficult to measure and stimulate. The variables involved, in fact, are many and related to each individual's per-

sonal experiences and histories, that is, to the subjective purposes for which an individual decides to engage in a learning journey to improve his or her proficiency in a language and use it to enhance his or her personal or professional life. There are numerous studies in Educational Linguistics on the value, importance, and impact of motivation for language learning/teaching to which we refer.[22]

Within the COD Model, motivation can be seen as the engine that feeds into opportunities to use and increase proficiency. In turn, increased motivation increases opportunities to be able to use the language and particularly affects the development of communicative competence. Again, therefore, it is clear how revitalization of a language must equally focus on all three aspects.

All studies on motivations for learning Italian, from Baldelli (1976) to Giovanardi and Trifone (2010) emphasize that intrinsic motivations clearly outweigh extrinsic ones. One learns Italian for the pleasure of approaching a millennial culture, a way of life, the pleasure of food, music, art, traveling to Italy, etc... Such "cultural" reasons are common to all students, whether Heritage Language Students or not. To these, HHLs add others, even more related to their personal sentiments.

For a Heritage Language Learner, the desire to learn language is very often linked to emotional reasons. Such motivations can be the strongest, but also the most unstable. The search for one's own identity and roots, the emotional and affective reasons of relating to grandparents, or relatives, are typical motivations for the Heritage Language Learner.

For the Heritage Learner of Italian in the U.S., these are certainly important motivations as well, as shown by the analysis on this aspect taken from the 2010 survey data (Dolci 2017). Among the motivations most selected by students to motivate their choice to study Italian, three are particularly related to Heritage Language: the possibility of being able to speak Italian with relatives and friends, identification with

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[22] We mention here only the studies of Gardner (2010), Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011.

"Italian American," thus an expression of "ethnic pride," and the desire to travel to Italy to reconnect with one's roots.

Although it is certainly very difficult to plan intervention strategies to vitalize motivation, it is perhaps the emphasis on cultural reasons that may offer a key to be used for language promotion.

Some data show that Italian is a highly desired language in the US. In a 2008 ACTFL survey language students in high schools were asked the following question, "If you had any option available to you, which of the following languages would you be most interested in studying?" Italian is together with French and Spanish among the most "desired" languages.[23]

Milione and Gambino (2009) also reach the same conclusions:

> […] the overall interest and use of Italian has not declined, and instead has seen an increase due to greater interest in learning the language among Americans of many different backgrounds. Approximately one out of three of all Italian Speakers in the United States are non-Italian (p. 47).[24]

Another statistic shows a preference for Italian, or rather Italy: students from colleges and universities spending a study period of at least two weeks in the "Belpaese." Data released annually by Open Doors show that for many years Italy has consistently ranked second as the destination of choice, very close to the UK. Practically the top destination among non-English speaking countries.[25]

It is very likely that these data demonstrate not only a

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[23] Unfortunately, this figure is also not very reliable, as it is now dated. As we have repeatedly stated, a sharp snapshot of the situation is crucial to proposing any new tools or identifying new revitalization strategies.

[24] Milione Gambino also state that the availability of Italian language courses at schools fails to cover the demand for learning Italian (2009:47). This corroborates the "desirability of Italian in the US.

[25] <https://opendoorsdata.org/annual-release/u-s-study-abroad/#fast-facts>

specific willingness to learn the Italian language, but rather a desire to primarily approach its culture, the image it represents, to thus become part of that imagined community (Pavlenko and Norton 2007) formed by those people who feel Italian because they share certain values and lifestyles. The set of these values can be defined by the term "Italianità" or, even better, "Italicità" (Bassetti 2017).[26]

Analyses done by Nation Branding institutes clearly show that Italy is always among the top on cultural aspects, tourism, landscape and lifestyle in the first place (Dolci 2016). This shows that the image of Italian culture in the world is certainly not in need of revitalization, and that this can become the motivational key (Desire Enhancement) through which to revitalize the language, for example, by combining a better knowledge of it (Capacity or Competence Enhancement) with a greater appreciation of the culture; by increasing the offer of opportunities (Opportunity Creation) of language use but also and above all of getting closer to the culture; thus nurturing the desire to belong to this imagined community. The role of the HLL then becomes not only that of a user, but also that of a "bottom-up" promoter, particularly credible and attuned to "outsider" learners. To identify and include the latter, we could coin the definition of "Heritage Culture Learner" and consequently designate a "*Heritage Language and Culture*", adopting and adapting the definitions of Cho, Cho and Tse (1997) for whom a heritage language is "the language associated with one's cultural background and it may or may not be spoken at home." (p.106) and by Van Deusen-Scholl when he speaks of "[speakers] who may culturally connected to the language" (p. 221).[27]

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[26] These values must be used carefully. Indeed, in the past they have sometimes been exploited for political purposes. Recall, for example, the myth of "Italianità" aroused by the fascist regime. Therefore, we prefer to use the concept of "Italicità" coined by Bassetti. Among the values that make it up in addition to those of beauty and lifestyle, the fundamental values of democracy, diversity and respect for human rights stand out.

[27] Thus, adopting for all these students the definition of "Heritage Language and/or Culture Learners."

Conclusions

This was a first attempt to apply the COD model to Italian in the US. While limited, it offered us an opportunity to reflect on the status of the Italian language in the U.S. and what the best tools might be for a needed revitalization initiative. Much more research is needed. The importance of planning appropriate intervention policies remains. The Capacity, Opportunity, Desire model can provide valuable indications on how to act and on which fields to insist or improve intervention. The finding that also emerges for the U.S. context is that the model requires coordinated efforts on all three components. Instead, even in the U.S. there have often been initiatives that have focused only on promoting formal education, which is not yielding the desired results. The research, therefore, aims to emphasize that without a coordinated initiative by all stakeholders involving the three factors identified by the model, any revitalization effort may be short of breath.

The data show that Italian in the US still exists as a heritage language, and that it is precisely because of this that it endures as an educational offering. And that there is still much room for its revitalization, which must involve even those who do not declare Italian ancestry, but who nevertheless have in some way a cultural heritage link to Italy and what it represents and make them citizens of that Italic community outlined by Bassetti. This peculiarity suggests an expansion of the Heritage Language Learner concept by also including culture as an identity factor.

The COD model calls for an assumption of responsibility by the institutions entrusted with language policy and the promotion of language and culture. Such intervention by institutions is indispensable but not sufficient. It is a model that requires top-down action but also bottom-up involvement, providing the tools that must be properly used by everyone according to their roles and competencies. Revitalizing Italian as a Heritage Language, and beyond, in the U.S. is certainly not an easy task, but as Walsh (2005: 293), reported by Lo Bianco (2014: 59), states:

It remains unclear why some attempts at language revitalization succeed, whereas others fail. What is clear is that the process is profoundly political.

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