
'It's so cute how they talk': Stylized Italian English as sociolinguistic maintenance

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Italian Canadians are combining features of Italian and English
to creatively assert their identities

Introduction

In a downtown Border City,¹ Ontario coffee shop, I interviewed Carlo, an Italian-Canadian man in his late 50s. He explained that his children, who are in their 20s, do not demonstrate much productive use of Italian, but that they have maintained the language in that they understand their grandparents' Italian and can imitate their Italian-accented English. I refer to the linguistic phenomenon that Carlo mentions as Stylized Italian English (SIE), which is the primary focus of this paper.

This paper begins with a brief ethnographic and linguistic background of the community and participants. I then explore specific features of Stylized Italian English as it is used in multigenerational family interactions, showing that second and third generation family members use SIE to index Italianness. Finally, I discuss SIE within larger contexts of language shift and maintenance and language contact research.

Background of the participant community

The participants in this study, including Carlo and his family, are part of a larger community of Italian Canadians in Border City. Border City is a metropolitan area in Ontario, Canada with a population of approximately 325,000 (including surrounding townships). According to the 2001 Canadian Census, 30,685 people of Italian origin live in the Border City metropolitan area (approximately 9.5% of Border

City's total population) (Canadian Census Bureau, 2001).

First generation family members migrated to and settled in Canada in the 1950s and 1960s as part of a wave of mass migration from Italy after World War II. The community is in a rapid language shift situation typical of North American migrants: first generation participants were born in Italy and are Italian dominant, the second generation are either Canadian born or migrated to Canada as children and are productively bilingual in English and Italian, and the third and fourth generation are Canadian born and use English almost exclusively. When first generation participants



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do speak English it is Italian-accented English (IAE), and the younger generations' English is a mainstream Canadian variety that I refer to as Mainstream Canadian English (MCE).

For approximately 25 or 30 years after they arrived in Canada, the participants in this study lived in neighborhoods in Border City with high concentrations of Italians, and thus maintained many of their Italian cultural and linguistic ideologies and practices. When most second generation family members moved out of their family homes, they moved out of the Italian neighborhoods, but maintained Italian language and culture in other ways. Italianness has remained relevant across generations, but what is shifting are the sociolinguistic means through which speakers express and create Italianness. Among those means are Italian-English code switching, interpreting in family conversation, the insertion of emblematic Italian lexical items (see Del Torto, 2008), and Stylized Italian English.

Metalinguistic data show that all participants fear that the Italian language and culture in Border City are disappearing. Most of them lament this language and cultural attrition, and many discuss efforts to maintain Italian culture and language. Second generation participants claim that they want to encourage language and cultural maintenance, but the third generation see family linguistic norms as discouraging them from using Italian in spite of the communicative competence they claim. Even though most participants have evaluated the third and fourth generations' linguistic practice as a shift that is contributing to the attrition of Italian culture in Border City, these speakers (and older generations as well) are maintaining their Italian heritage symbolically in what ways they can. For them, maintenance does not mean the fluent use of Italian in everyday situations. In fact, people rely on a variety of linguistic resources and ideologies in their efforts to maintain Italianness and aspects of Italian language, and Stylized Italian English is one of those resources.

Social and linguistic aspects of Stylized Italian English

SIE is a linguistic resource in which second generation and third generation family members, whose English is not usually Italian-accented, use Italian phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical features in

otherwise English utterances in certain conversational situations. SIE is socially meaningful only because it is part of a system of distinction in which language styles and the social meanings associated with them are perceived as contrastive (Irvine, 2001). Thus, there are ideological distinctions that make the use of SIE socially meaningful in contrast with the usual Mainstream Canadian English of the younger-generation speakers. First generation family members do not use SIE, nor do they have access to it; SIE is not different enough from their usual English – IAE – to be socially meaningful as a style.

I argue that the SIE pattern of using Italian features in English utterances contributes to the creation of a specifically Italian-Canadian sociolinguistic identity for second and third generation family members within family conversational settings. Although SIE does not fall under traditional definitions of language maintenance, participants perceive it as a means of maintaining the Italian language and their Italianness.

When second and third generation participants talk about SIE, they often relate it to the Italian-accented English of the first generation, referring to both as 'an Italian way of speaking English.' A participant in her late 50s told me, 'It's so cute how they (first generation) talk. They mix up English and Italian and create this new language.' Participants see certain SIE features as 'belonging' to Italian and others as 'belonging' to English, combining to create an innovative linguistic resource that has social meaning.

Participants make use of an array of linguistic resources in establishing Italian-Canadian individual and family identities, and this paper explores one of those resources. Speakers use SIE as an innovative resource to index Italianness and Canadianness simultaneously by juxtaposing language features that they associate with Italian and English. This innovation is a result of a larger system of linguistic shift and maintenance in which participants are negotiating simultaneous pressures to shift to exclusive use of English and assimilate to Canadian social identities and to maintain the Italian language and Italian identities.

It is difficult to isolate a systematic or exhaustive set of SIE features because participants do not always rely on the same set of phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical features to signal SIE speech. However,

as long as we acknowledge that this list is not exhaustive and that there will be exceptions, we can generalize SIE phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical patterning with the following set of features.

Phonological features:

- 1 Absence of pre-vocalic /h/ (e.g. *how* sounds like *ow*)
- 2 Flap /r/ in place of approximant /ɹ/ intervocalically (e.g. *earring* sounds like *eating*)
- 3 Epenthetic /ə/ utterance-finally, and interconsonantly at word boundaries (e.g. a schwa vowel sound is inserted between *long* and *time* in the phrase *long time*)
- 4 Realization of /θ/ and /ð/ as /t/ and /d/, respectively (e.g. *thigh* sounds like *tie*, *then* sounds like *den*)
- 5 Deletion of post-vocalic, pre-consonantal /r/ (e.g. *order it* sounds like *odor it*)
- 6 Clear /l/ (e.g. the /l/ in *feel* sounds like the /l/ in *freely*)
- 7 Raising and fronting of /ɪ/ to /i/ (e.g. *it* sounds like *eat*)
- 8 Raising of /æ/ to /ɛ/ (e.g. *bat* sounds like *bet*)
- 9 Unaspirated voiceless stops (e.g. the puff of air usually released by MCE speakers after the /p/ in *pie* is absent, making it sound similar to the /b/ in *buy*)
- 10 Geminate consonants (e.g. the /b/ sound in *maybe* is lengthened)
- 11 Lengthening of high and low monophthongs in stressed, non-final, open syllables (e.g. the first vowel in *coffee* is longer than it would be in MCE)

Morphological and syntactic features:

- 1 Absence of verbal tense marking (*she walk* vs. *she walks*, *she walk* vs. *she walked*)
- 2 Absence of verbal auxiliary *do* (*he no go* vs. *he does not go*)
- 3 Multiple negation using *no*² (*he no got none* vs. *he doesn't have any*)
- 4 Adjectival reduplication as an intensifier (*the cookies are dry dry* vs. *the cookies are very dry*)

Lexical features

- 1 Nonstandard use of prepositions (*we go on Italy* or *we go in Italy* vs. *we go to Italy*)

Excerpt (1) below, which is taken from the recording of a Ferrari family dinner, exempli-

fies SIE³ within a multigenerational⁴ family mealtime setting. Angelo and Livia are first generation family members, and they are Gino's parents. Diana and Gino are second generation participants, and are husband and wife. Ben and Beth are third generation participants in their 20s, and are Diana and Gino's children.

Excerpt (1)

- 1 Diana (2) What'd they give you to eat on the plane Angelo?
- 2 Angelo (1) Nothing.
- 3 Diana (2) [Nothing?
- 4 Gino (2) [Nothing at all?
- 5 Livia (1) No. Nothing to eat.
- 6 Gino (2) No cookies or coffee or anything?
- 7 Livia (1) [Drinks yeah. They gave us coffee, tea, pop, water. But no dinner.
- 8 Angelo (1) [I get some coffee and that's it.
- 9 Gino (2) O:h. Some coffee /samm k'a:fi/?
- 10 Ben (3) [Coffee /k'a:fi/. And that's it? /e dets et/?
- 11 Beth (3) [(laughs)]
- 12 Angelo(1) [That's all n-
- 13 Livia (1) [Well only drinks. They had pop and water too and tea.
- 14 Gino (2) Not even any peanuts /p'i'nots/?
- 15 Diana (2) ((laughs))
- 16 Beth (3) ((laughs))
- 17 Ben (3) ((laughs))
- 18 Livia (1) No:: Gino. No food at all.

As demonstrated in turns 9, 10, and 14, SIE is typified by the use of perceived Italian phonological features in perceived English utterances. Other excerpts show that some SIE utterances also make use of Italian morphological, syntactic, and lexical features.

The sequential environment in which SIE is used and the social functions of such use are illuminating to the research on second generation language use. SIE is often followed by either (1) laughter, or (2) both laughter and repetition, as it is in the exchange represented in Excerpt (1) above. SIE is preceded at times by a first generation speaker's Italian-accented English. In Excerpt (1), Gino's initiation of an SIE sequence in turn 9 is immediately preceded by his father's Italian-accented English utterance in turn 8. One of the most salient features of IAE is influence from Italian phonology. Although SIE does not *always* immediately follow an IAE utterance, that SIE sometimes piggybacks on IAE indicates that there are ideological and linguistic links between them.

SIE piggybacking

Through imitation, participants simultaneously establish Italianness, create affiliations, and voice other people. As described in the sections above, some speakers use SIE to repeat an immediately previous IAE utterance. I refer to such instances as *SIE piggybacking*. The following exchange has been excerpted from a multigenerational mealtime conversation among the Ricci family. Fred's (second generation) SIE utterance of *la baby* piggybacks on his mother, Ada's, immediately previous IAE utterance of the same.

Excerpt (2)

- 1 Ada (1) **Questa è la baby di nonna lo sai?**
This is grandma's baby you know?
- 2 Fred (2) *La baby /lə be'bbi/*
- 3 Maria (3),
Lisa [(laughs)]
- 4 Nina (2) [(laughs)] *She was the baby of the family.*
- 5 Maria (3) *Mhm.*
- 6 Lisa *O::h.*
- 7 Ada (1) *My baby.*

Fred's repetition of *la baby* essentially draws attention to his mother's use of the noun phrase by mimicking it. The distinction between Ada's IAE, Fred's SIE, and Fred's usual MCE highlights linguistic and social distinctions and similarities among Ricci family members. Fred and the rest of the family speak MCE and their matriarch, Ada, speaks IAE. While younger-generation family members may distinguish themselves from Ada in terms of their language use and other social behaviors, together they form an Italian-Canadian family whose matriarch's English is Italian-accented and, thus, available to be imitated. They share and express Italian-Canadianness and familiness using, among other resources, Italian linguistic features; in this case the younger-generation family members use SIE to express and create their membership in an Italian-Canadian family.

This example shows that imitation through SIE can index distinct individual identities as well as shared collective identities. Through his use of SIE here, Fred constructs himself as someone with enough access to Italian to use the Italian phonological influence as a resource to voice his mother and comment on her speech, simultaneously aligning himself with her and defining himself as somewhat different from her. The indexical links between SIE and

IAE, Italian and English languages, and Italian Canadianness allow participants to use SIE to claim membership in Italian-Canadian social aggregates.

SIE as quoted speech

Although SIE piggybacking as explored in the last section may be understood as a quotative device because it is used to repeat the words of another speaker, this section examines SIE as quoted speech when it is not repeating or commenting on an immediately previous IAE utterance. Quotative SIE, like SIE piggybacking, involves embodying or invoking another person, and is an innovative resource borne out of participants' negotiations of the dual pressures of shift and maintenance. Quotative SIE relies on the juxtaposition of linguistic resources from English and Italian as a system of distinction in conversation (Irvine, 2001). Second and third generation participants can signal that they are quoting another through SIE because SIE is distinctive from their usual MCE.

Excerpt (3) below illustrates SIE as quoted speech. The Ricci family has been discussing an old friend of Fred's whom their mom, Ada, trusted. Unlike some of the previous examples Fred's first SIE utterance here does not piggyback on an immediate IAE utterance. Instead, this use of SIE is voicing his mother's attitude about something, perhaps recalling previous events in which she uttered the same.

Excerpt (3)

- 1 Nina (2) *She trusted Ernie. O:::h.*
- 2 ALL [(laughs)]
- 3 Fred (2) [Big mistake.]
- 4 Sam (2) *Wait. Stop it. Now you're gonna make her not sleep tonight.*
- 5 Nina (2) *O:::h.*
- 6 Fred (2) *I didn't trust him. [I wanted to come home. He was scaring the hell out of me.*
- 7 ALL [(laughs)]
- 8 Nina (2) [I was in the seat like this.]
- 9 Fred (2) [But he was a nice boy /naizə boi/.
A nice boy /naizə boi/.]
- 10 ALL [(laughs)]
- 11 Nina (2) *Ernie was a nice boy /naizə boi/.*
- 12 ALL [(laughs)]
- 13 Ada (1) *He is a nice boy.*
- 14 Fred (2) [Mmm.]
- 15 Nina (2) [Yes. Yes he is a nice boy nonna.]
- 16 Tess (2) [(laughs)]
- 17 Sam (2) *We believe you nonna.*

Fred and Nina are voicing their mother, using SIE to distance themselves from the claim that Ernie ‘was a nice boy’; they make it clear that the statement is coming from their mother and not from them. They use a combination of Italian and English linguistic resources to call into effect the voice, character, and attitudes of their mother, someone whose English they see as phonologically distinct from their own. Nina and Fred imitate their mother’s speech to embody her attitude about Ernie, which they disagree with. While this imitation effectively distances Fred and Nina from their mother’s attitude, it is not a hostile mockery that distances them as people. In fact, the imitation through SIE presented in this excerpt is an effective means of quotation because Fred and Nina know their mother and her attitudes well enough to embody them through linguistic means. Doing so effectively creates solidarity around sociolinguistic behaviors and identities.

Participants may use quotative SIE to report utterances previously spoken by (or in some other way tied to) other participants who are present, as Fred did in Excerpt (3) above. Other examples in the corpus show that quotative SIE is also used to report the speech of someone not present in the immediate interaction as well as hypothetical speech from someone who is present in the immediate interaction. However, SIE and Italian are never necessary to signal first generation reported speech or to invoke the voice of an IAE speaker. This evidence suggests that SIE is a resource available to MCE speakers to perform another’s voice, but not one that is predictable or required.

SIE is a resource that second and third generation participants can use only because of the stage of the shift-maintenance system in which the oldest generation’s English can be distinguished from younger-generation family members’ English with Italian features. The first generation, who are IAE speakers, do not have access to SIE as a meaningful resource because it is often not distinct enough from their own English to constitute any meaningful stylistic choice.

Non-imitative SIE

While previous analytical sections demonstrate SIE as used in voicing another, the data analyzed in this section cannot be as clearly linked

to other voices, but similarly demonstrate that SIE establishes Italianness and familiness.

In the following excerpt Fred uses SIE to demonstrate the symbolic Italianness of an inanimate food item by juxtaposing his MCE pronunciation of *watermelon* /'warəɪm'lən/ with an SIE /warəmə'lon/. We were eating watermelon at the end of a meal and it had a slight onion taste. Fred shifts the conversation to garlic, something that is understood to be a typical Italian flavor, and uses phonological distinctions to project Italianness onto the watermelon.

Excerpt (4)

- | | | |
|----|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | Maria (3) | I tastes like onions. |
| 2 | Tess (2) | I know. Maybe the cutting board. |
| 3 | Lisa | It still tastes good though. Mine does that sometimes. Even if you clean it sometimes the flavor stays on the board. |
| 4 | Tess (2) | The cutting board was clean but I I think it’s. I cut it on the cutting board and maybe the cutting board had onions on it. |
| 5 | Fred (2) | Would you like watermelon with a little garlic flavor? |
| 6 | Lisa | ((laughs)) |
| 7 | Maria (3) | Hey. Watermelon good. Garlic good. |
| 8 | Fred (2),
Lisa | ((laughs)) |
| 9 | Fred (2) | It’s like that it’s it’s it’s not watermelon anymore it’s watermelon /warəmə'lon/ |
| 10 | Maria (3),
Lisa | ((laughs)) |
| 11 | Maria (3) | It’s a watermelon with an Italian twist. |
| 12 | Fred (2) | It’s a watermelon /warəmə'lon/ |
| 13 | Nina (2) | Watermelon /warəmə'lon/ |
| 14 | ALL | ((laughs)) |

To the Ricci family, the addition of garlic flavor to watermelon gives it some sense of Italianness. Fred represents this ‘Italian watermelon’ linguistically by stylizing the pronunciation of the English term *watermelon* using Italian phonology. The juxtaposition of these phonologically distinct realizations in turn 9 actually creates two lexical items with different referents. Fred is not invoking anyone’s voice in particular, nor is he imitating anyone’s English, but he is invoking Italianness.

Maria’s claim that ‘it’s watermelon with an Italian twist’ can be seen as interpreting not only the food item itself but also Fred’s SIE utterance of watermelon: it’s an English word

with an Italian twist. The typical SIE repetition and laughter patterns are demonstrated here and, as usual, signal understanding, cohesion, and cooperation in the Italianizing of the term and the food item itself.

Discussion

In the shift-maintenance system, the participants have made do with the various linguistic resources at their disposal in creative ways that they can now use to identify themselves as Italian Canadians. Although we might be tempted to focus on what the practical realities of immigration have taken away from people in terms of language and culture, we can also see the new resources that they have created specifically because of this situation.

Participants' use of SIE is sociolinguistic maintenance; they use Italian phonological and grammatical features (the linguistic) to represent Italianness (the social) symbolically. Speakers are taking advantage of shift and maintenance together to create an entirely new resource through which they can claim and assert their Italian-Canadian identities.

Speakers' creation and use of new linguistic resources demonstrate that (1) language shift to English and linguistic maintenance of Italian are occurring simultaneously; (2) each generation is maintaining at least some Italian linguistic features in their intergenerational interactions; (3) participants are shifting to Canadian identities at the same time as they are maintaining Italian identities; and (4) participants are creating specifically Italian-Canadian identities.

In the type of language contact situation that I study, standards of what counts as speaking a language change in particular ways so that participation in certain kinds of ritualized sociolinguistic activities (here, SIE) that may not otherwise be considered *language* maintenance still indexes *sociolinguistic* identities. Maintenance need not be defined *only* by the use of a particular set of linguistic features or a particular level of fluency (i.e. it is not just the 'balanced bilinguals' who are maintaining), but can also be understood as maintenance of a sociolinguistic identity through social symbolic means, with language as one of those social symbols.

Although SIE is an innovative resource within the Italian-Canadian community in Border City, it is certainly not unique in kind. Bani-

Shoraka (2005), for instance, explores multi-generational interaction among an Azerbaijani-Persian family, and finds that they use Stylized Persian, 'Persian pronounced with a heavy and exaggerated Azerbaijani accent, often indicating a non-serious and ridiculous tone of voice,' as a resource for imitating non-present older-generation family members (188). Similar to Stylized Italian English, Stylized Persian relies on the mixing of Azerbaijani phonological features to pronounce Persian phrases.

As linguists who study language contact from on-the-ground ethnographic perspectives, we can see the ways in which aggregates and individuals simultaneously accommodate pressures to shift and to maintain. If we choose to focus on what speakers are doing with the resources they do have, rather than focusing on the resources they have lost, we can learn more about linguistic creativity and innovation as elements in linguistic maintenance.

Transcription conventions

Name (2)	Speaker pseudonym with generational category in parentheses.
.	Tone group boundary within an utterance. A stopping fall in tone.
((laughs))	Paralinguistic information and contextual notes.
:	Lengthened syllable. Multiple colons indicate a more prolonged syllable.
?	Rising intonation contour.
,	Continuing intonation.
[Simultaneous speech (overlap).
/kæt/	IPA transcription (used for SIE).
=	Unaspirated voiceless stop.
-	Cut-off.
Bold	Utterances in Italian.
<i>Italics</i>	English translation below Italian utterance.

Bold & Underline Indeterminate or bivalent items.

I have adapted transcription conventions from Ten Have (1999). ■

Notes

1 Names of all people, institutions, and cities are pseudonyms.

2 Multiple negation is found in Italian and is common among non-standard English varieties (e.g. African American English as described in Green, 2002). In SIE and IAE, speakers use *no* in multiple negation whereas speakers of most non-standard English varieties use *not*.

3 I transcribe instances of SIE in square brackets using the International Phonetic Alphabet to illustrate the Italian phonological features that mark SIE use. See Section 8 for transcription conventions.

4 Generational category is provided in parentheses next to speaker pseudonym in all excerpts.

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Hyperbole in English

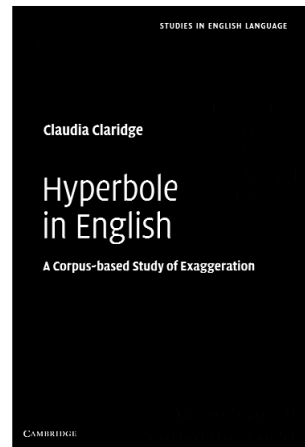
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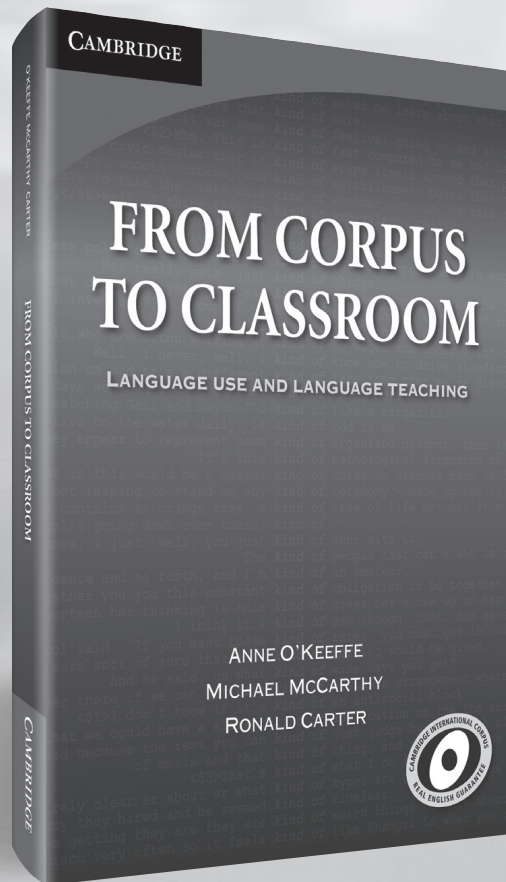
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