

Tariq Harney

Discourse, Fractal Recursivity and legitimization through the creation of 'other' in Italy

Abstract

In this paper I use an experiential personal reflection on my integration in northern Italy as an 'other'. Through this process I examine how varied social, cultural and economic backgrounds of immigrants produce distinct experiences of 'otherness'. I apply Gal and Irvine's theory of fractal recursivity and Bourdieu's study of language legitimization to explore how relations between migrants are reflective of longstanding regional relations in Italy. I contend that the presence of discourses of language legitimacy creates an environment which incentivizes the delegitimization of an 'other' to integrate.

Capitolo 1

"Ma cosa vuoi, Matteo". What do you want Matteo. I remember the hockey dressing room scene after a frustrating loss in the semifinals of our Under-14 league.

It was my first year living in Trento, Italy and my Italian was a work in progress. I had finally been deemed fluent enough to participate in regular Italian lessons rather than have to leave the classroom for what would be the equivalent of ESL classes in Italy. Nonetheless, I retained a noticeably foreign accent, something I was acutely aware of as I confronted my teammate in the aftermath of the game. As with most regions in Italy, Trentino has its unique dialect a symptom of Italy's longstanding history as a contested territory that has been occupied by many major European powers since the fall of the Roman Empire 1500 years ago. Aware of my unwieldy accent I purposefully inflected my words with my best impression of the Trentino accent. Specifically, one of the most noticeable characteristics of Trentino dialect to a foreigner is the way that the v can sometimes come to approximate a w sound. Whether this is a symptom of the soft 'v' in German, the second language of the region, or simply a naturally occurring characteristic it is one that I felt I could approximate, and at that moment I assumed that it would legitimate my point. "Cosa vuoi, Matteo". I repeated more forcefully, using the Trentino inflection. I remember hearing some stifled laughs from some of my teammates startled at my use of slang pronunciation. It caught Matteo's attention and he turned towards me visibly irritated. "Impara a parlare come una persona normale prima di rivolgerti a me."

Learn to speak Italian like a normal person before you talk to me. That interaction reinforced in me the necessity of learning Italian, of being able to assimilate and communicate within the acceptable framework that was determined

by the dominant majority. I recall that the marginalization I felt at the moment was overwhelming. I knew I was not Italian, I was proud to be Canadian, so I was surprised how much Matteo's efforts to cast me as an outsider affected me. In hindsight it makes me reflect on other instances of linguistic discrimination that I had witnessed in school but had not fully comprehended at the time.

Through my personal experience as an immigrant in Italy, this paper will draw on arguments made by Bourdieu and Hall to examine the way that language and discourses surrounding language are used to create an identity, frequently by creating a concept of "other" and how certain spaces privilege certain individuals or groups¹². In particular, I will compare my immigrant experience to that of some of my other immigrant classmates to explore how my privileged western cultural background enabled me to integrate more easily thanks to my ability to fit into the image of a good Italian child that discourse in Italy produced. I will highlight how the pressure to linguistically conform for non-native speakers creates a divisive discourse within and between immigrant communities similar to that observed by Talmy in America³. This divisive discourse enables the creation of different classes of immigrants which mirror the fractal recursivity of language relations across Italy, where the standardization of Italian language norms serves to mask inherent social, cultural, and economic biases in Italy⁴. My father's research as an anthropologist who focused on the experience of migrants coming to Italy, and Europe in general, had brought us to Italy for year-long periods in 2004 and 2008 but despite attending school in Italian both times, my Italian could charitably be described as a beginner when we moved to Trento, Italy in 2012 just before my grade six-year. As a middle schooler moving to Italy and learning Italian, I was not immediately aware of the discourses that surrounded language and the privileges that being able to communicate in the local language entailed. However, even early on it became clear that the quickest and most effective way to fit in both school and social contexts was to become fluent in Italian, to assimilate. It also became clear that among non-native Italian speakers I encountered in school and generally, in Trento, a hierarchy emerged determined by linguistic ability and ethnicity. At the time I believe it

¹Bourdieu, Pierre. 1982. "The Production and Reproduction of Legitimate Language." In *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Pgs. 47-52.

²Hall, Stuart. 2018 [1992]. "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power." In *Essential Essays*. Volume 2: Identity and Diaspora. Duke University Press

³Talmy, Steven. 2004. "Forever FOB: The Cultural Production of ESL in a High School." *Pragmatics: Quarterly Publication of the International Pragmatics Association* 14 (2-3): 149-72. <https://doi.org/10.1075/prag.14.2-3.03tal>.

⁴Gal, Susan and Judith T. Irvine. 2000. "Language Ideology and Linguistic Differentiation." In *Regimes of Language: Ideologies, Politics, Identities*. P.V. Kroskity (ed). Pgs. 35-84.

subconsciously created an environment in which non-native speakers essentially raced to see who could conform and become less 'other'. My experience in Trento drove home how assimilating frequently occurred through efforts to highlighting another person or group more different than yourself.

My parents decided that there was no point in sending my sisters and myself to an international school. They wanted us to learn the local language and become comfortable in Italy and figured that the quickest way to do that was for us to be fully immersed in the Italian school system. So on the first day of school, I found myself sitting in class listening to my Italian teacher lecture at a speed that I was quite incapable of keeping up with. The first days of school were largely uneventful and I have little recollection of most of the events however in re-examining my experiences for this paper one particular moment came to the forefront of my mind.

It was the second class of the day and I had just met my boisterous Italian teacher; an energetic Sicilian woman with bright red hair and the typical melodically pleasant southern Italian speech pattern. As I will discuss later in the paper I do remember feeling put at ease by her initially, she was more similar to the warm lively Italians I remembered from our time in Naples than the more closed-off northerners in Trento. In hindsight, I believe her subsequent actions were reflective of how linguistic discrimination is fractally recursive particularly so in Italy.

However, the moment that most stood out to me that morning came from her line of questioning when reading the names of the students for roll call. Noting three non-Italian names she asked us each in turn what level of Italian we had and where we were from. The Pakistani girl, who I will call Maria in front of me, answered that her Italian was just alright and she had been here for about a year but was scheduled for ISL (Italian Second Language). Somewhat intimidated by the teacher's energy I recall being only able to muster a non-committal hand signal and saying "così-così", so-so to which I was rewarded with an exasperated sigh. The final student, who I will call Nicola, answered in a way that stuck with me, however, both because it underlined how national discourses of nation-building in Italy lead many to believe Italy is a homogeneous society and because it perfectly encapsulated how divisions based on linguistic ability are perpetuated and recreate structural inequality. He was a Moldovan immigrant, with a notably non-Italian name and yet he had lived in Trento almost his whole life and considered himself Italian. "Io non sono un immigrato come loro, Prof. Italiano e la mia lingua madre e la so parlare bene perché sono qua da quando avevo due anni." I am not an immigrant like them, Prof. Italian is my mother tongue and I know how to speak it well because I have been here since I was two". Within the span of two sentences my eleven-year-old classmate had somehow managed to accomplish two contradictory actions. Firstly he challenged the inherent bias in my teacher's discourse surrounding language, power, privilege, and immigration by positioning himself as an Italian speaker, an immigrant but only

in that he was not born here. However, the tool he used to do that was the creation of an 'other': in this case Maria and myself. Thus he simultaneously challenged and reasserted the structures and inherent bias he was attempting to challenge in the first place. Talmy⁵ observes a similar phenomenon occurring in the ESL classes he observes, wherein there is an effort by local-ESL students to differentiate themselves and mark themselves as part of the norm by reinforcing the 'otherness' FOB (Fresh of the Boat) ESL students who are not locals. In my case, Maria and I had been pushed into the FOB category by Nicola. By no means was this a malicious action on the part of Nicolae, rather I believe it was one of self-preservation. In hindsight, this seems even more likely given that I distinctly recall the look of relief on my teacher's face when she realized she would only have two problem pupils. This was not the first instance in which I observed the creation of a linguistic 'other' to assimilate. The next instance that came to mind was later that year in my history class. My history teacher was well-traveled and much more aware of the insecurity that non-native Italian speakers felt in school and as such her lessons were always much more accessible to me. However, I recall that the class had been discussing immigration during geography class and upon reading the definition one of my classmates reasonably pointed out that I was, in fact, an immigrant when asked to give an example. By this time I had managed to learn Italian well enough that my teachers accepted my request to join the rest of the class on the regularly scheduled Italian curriculum. Unlike China and Raven in Talmy's ESL school⁶, I was able to convince my teachers to move me to the regular classes. My Italian was likely worse than their English yet I presented as white, confident, I was male and my parents were teachers. I came from a privileged context that was looked upon favorably by my teachers. Furthermore, unlike in the case of Maria who was Pakistani, my home life was culturally very similar to most average Italian children making it easy for my teachers to buy into the discourse that I was a good student with a good family who would thrive outside ISL. Just as it was a source of annoyance for Raven and China, my escape from ISL enabled me to no longer feel like an outsider. I was not in any way ashamed of not being Italian, if anything I was proud of my Canadian heritage, perhaps obnoxiously so. Yet the fairly innocent categorization of myself as an immigrant by my classmate was one that I found I immediately rejected. When my history teacher nodded and affirmed that my classmate was, in fact, correct I recall myself arguing that I was not an immigrant. But why did I feel the necessity to distance myself from classification as an immigrant when objectively there was

⁵Talmy, Steven. 2004. "Forever FOB: The Cultural Production of ESL in a High School." *Pragmatics: Quarterly Publication of the International Pragmatics Association* 14 (2-3): 149-72. <https://doi.org/10.1075/prag.14.2-3.03tal>.

⁶Talmy, Steven. 2004. "Forever FOB: The Cultural Production of ESL in a High School." *Pragmatics: Quarterly Publication of the International Pragmatics Association* 14 (2-3): 149-72. <https://doi.org/10.1075/prag.14.2-3.03tal>

nothing wrong with it and what was I arguing when I rejected my categorization as an immigrant? I remember thinking in the moment, I cannot be an immigrant because Maria is an immigrant and I am not like her. In hindsight, I had recreated the same discourse between myself and Maria that Nicola had created between himself and Maria and me on the first day of school. I had graduated to a level of language ability that enabled me to put myself in a position of superiority by highlighting the 'otherness' of the nearest comparable in Maria⁷⁸. Furthermore, with Europe and especially Italy in the throes of an immigrant crisis that is largely still ongoing, the prevalent discourses in Italy surrounding immigration and immigrants were negative, with immigrants being portrayed as a problem for Europe. Thus, my rejection of being categorized as an immigrant was less about the actual categorization and more about rejecting the discourses that surrounded immigration. I instinctively viewed being categorized as an immigrant as negative, and inferior and associated it with my former classmates who were still in the ISL program. This understanding of immigrants as inferior and negative is also reflected in Nicola's initial introduction to my Italian teacher as someone who speaks Italian fluently and had lived in Italy his entire life. This effort to dissociate territory from language and identity is one brought up by Gal and Nicola's self-presentation as a non-Italian whose first language is Italian encapsulates that⁹. Thus the dominant societal discourse surrounding immigration influences the power dynamics within the classroom and encouraged non-native speakers to dissociate from the category of immigrant where possible. This naturally led to these non-native speakers needing to create a new identity for themselves, one divorced enough from their initial background that they would not immediately be associated with it. As Hall discusses in his *The West and the Rest* article the easiest and most common way that identity is created is through opposition to an 'other'¹⁰. Historical Examples of this include the European efforts to fight the Moors in Spain, and the Crusades, both of which hinged on deep-seated anxiety about the 'other'. Thus as Bourdieu points out our quest to create a new discourse around ourselves led to the inevitable creation of an 'other'. The easiest way for non-native speakers like Nicola and I to present ourselves without the connotation of 'other' was to emphasize the 'otherness' of

⁷Bourdieu, Pierre. 1982. "The Production and Reproduction of Legitimate Language." In *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Pgs. 47-52.

⁸Hall, Stuart. 2018 [1992]. "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power." In *Essential Essays*. Volume 2: Identity and Diaspora. Duke University Press.

⁹Gal, Susan. 2006. "Contradictions of Standard Language in Europe: Implications for the Study of Practices and Publics." *Social Anthropology* 14 (2): 163-81.

¹⁰Hall, Stuart. 2018 [1992]. "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power." In *Essential Essays*. Volume 2: Identity and Diaspora. Duke University Press.

someone else in our social context. In our very specific case, this was Maria, who due to cultural and social differences was undeniably an easy contrast for us to highlight.

The discourses that surround immigration and identity in Italy were also reflected in how I experienced different social contexts. While my status as a non-native speaker may have relegated me to a precarious social status in my school circle, hockey did quite the opposite. I posit that partially due to my comfort within hockey contexts I was able to pick up Italian much quicker once I began spending most afternoons after school at the rink. While my lack of familiarity with Italian was undeniably a barrier to some extent at school, although I eventually overcame it, my identity as a Canadian hockey player in Italian hockey spaces granted me a privileged status. My identity at school revolved around the discourse of immigrants which as we have established was not necessarily empowering for non-native speakers. Meanwhile, at the rink, the discourse surrounding my identity went from one based on my identity as an 'other', to one that framed me as a Canadian who knew more about hockey and had been able to play in Canada. The lack of focus on my identity as 'other' in the hockey context, and 'otherness' being seen as positive in this case, enabled me to simply interact with my teammates and coaches rather than having to perform and reach for an identity that did not mark me out as 'other' in the eyes of those I was interacting with. It also enabled me to create a favorable relationship with my cultural heritage which projects such as the cultural heritage assignment Raven and China have to complete in Talmy's¹¹ article which was commonplace in my school as well did not necessarily enable. This was reinforced by how, when asked to do a project about our cultural heritage by our Italian teacher the following year I was thrilled yet Maria, who I had befriended at that point was less enthusiastic. She was justifiably worried how the otherness that was thrust upon her would be amplified by an exploration of her culture which differed substantially from that of most of our classmates. While my Canadian cultural heritage was easily relatable to my classmates, Maria's Pakistani heritage and insidious discourses propagated by opportunistic nationalists in Europe created an environment in which any allusion to her culture immediately reinforced the discourse of immigrants and other that already surrounded her. Once again my position of privilege highlighted how relations between migrants became fractally recursive¹².

¹¹Talmy, Steven. 2004. "Forever FOB: The Cultural Production of ESL in a High School." *Pragmatics: Quarterly Publication of the International Pragmatics Association* 14 (2-3): 149-72. <https://doi.org/10.1075/prag.14.2-3.03tal>.

¹²Gal, Susan. 2006. "Contradictions of Standard Language in Europe: Implications for the Study of Practices and Publics." *Social Anthropology* 14 (2): 163-81. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0964028206002515>.

The fractal recursivity that I observed occurring among non-native Italian speakers in my school is indicative of the larger discourse surrounding language standardization in Italy¹³¹⁴. Due to Italy's history as a historically contested territory, Italians have developed strong regional identities and dialects that reflect the varied history of the peninsula, including French, German, and Austrian occupation. The region I lived in, Trentino, was historically occupied by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and German is considered an official language in the region to this day with the northern part of the region considering German the first language in many instances. The differentiation between north and south within the Trentino region reproduces the larger relationship between northerners and southerners that exists within Italy. When my Italian teacher from Sicily subconsciously perpetuated the idea of homogeneous Italy in her singling out of non-Italian speakers that day in class she was herself reproducing the relationship between north and south. In Italy, the north has historically been richer, with southerners being discriminated against and frequently referred to as lazy or 'terroni', earth people. The north's historical economic supremacy due to a variety of factors stemming from the unification of Italy has created a relationship wherein southerners have to combat harmful discourses surrounding not only their abilities but also their language. Southern dialects and accents, readily noticeable to fluent Italian speakers have been known to turn off employers and have been associated with backward ways of life, similar to the provincial French dialects that Bourdieu examines¹⁵. Ultimately, these discourses descend from Italy's complicated unification history. Upon unification one of Italy's founders, Massimo D'Azeglio famously said, with Italy made, we must now make Italians. One of the discourses that arose surrounded the legitimacy of Dante's Italian as the basis for standardized Italian. With northern authors such as Manzoni essentially dominating this sphere northern Italians were empowered by the promotion of their Italian as legitimate.

The promotion of a standardized language naturally creates a discourse of 'other' and Italy is still dealing with the ramifications of this division in the frequently tense north-south relationship¹⁶. My teacher's effort to create an 'other' by categorizing non-native speakers as that was simply the reproduction of that relationship. As a southerner, her demeanor was certainly one that I was able to empathize with, as she experienced similar marginalization to the one I felt for example when Matteo engaged with me following a hockey game. However, similar to how both Nicola and myself, eventually affirmed our assimilation by positioning

¹³Ibidem

¹⁴Bourdieu, Pierre. 1982. "The Production and Reproduction of Legitimate Language." In *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Pgs. 47-52.

¹⁵Bourdieu, Pierre. 1982. "The Production and Reproduction of Legitimate Language." In *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Pgs. 47-52.

¹⁶ibidem

ourselves in relation to an 'other', my Italian teacher affirmed her legitimacy by placing herself as the arbiter of whether or not we were fluent enough to be considered part of the class.

Ultimately I witnessed three levels of fractal recursivity while in Trento. The most obvious was the simmering rivalry between northerners and southerners founded in a history of legitimization of language that privileged northern Italians.

The next level was within Trentino, as the northern, German part of the region attempted to differentiate itself by having German as its primary language and reproducing the language legitimacy debates within the region. Finally, within my context as an immigrant, I contributed to the reproduction and creation of 'other' to assimilate and conform.

Ultimately, my experience as an immigrant from a privileged social, cultural and economic background enabled me to assimilate more easily than some of my immigrant classmates. However, it did not stop me from perpetuating discourses of otherness that immigrants were encouraged to use to assimilate and seem more Italian. These discourses of 'other' were ultimately reflective of the longstanding discourses around nation-building and language legitimacy in Italy that stem from Italy's history as a contested territory.