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# SICILIANS IN DETROIT: HOW DO THEY SPEAK?

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department Modern Languages  
The University of Mississippi

by

GIOVANNA BRUNETTI

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## ABSTRACT

The present study focuses on the linguistic analysis of the varieties of the Sicilian dialect spoken in the city of Detroit, Michigan. The city has witnessed, starting from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, a steady process of immigration and settlement involving speakers mainly arriving from the two Sicilian coastal towns of Terrasini and Cinisi. The varieties they speak appear to have never been the subject of systematic observation. The present study, thus, focuses on the preservation, attrition and/or loss of the phonological features of the Sicilian dialect spoken by a community of Sicilian immigrants of different generations living in Detroit.

Native speakers of Sicilian who had immigrated to the United States as first-generation Americans and their second-generation American children were interviewed in both Sicilian and English. They responded to questions concerning their life in the US, retold a story seen in a picture book and counted from one to 20. Sections of the interview in both languages were then judged by native speakers of Sicilian and English respectively for native-like pronunciation.

The analysis of the data tried to determine what variables affect the (possible) differences in the subjects' phonology, and whether these differences can affect the perception of native-like pronunciation.

Keywords:

Italian diaspora, second language phonology, sociolinguistic, Sicilian/Italian, English.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Starting from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many Italians have been attracted by the so-called “American Dream”. People suffering from the devastations of World War I moved from their homeland to the land of opportunity and settled in different big cities like New York, Chicago and Detroit, looking for better life conditions. Immigrants arrived from all the Italian regions, but mostly from the southern ones such as Calabria, Campania, Abruzzi and Sicily. They were employed in many types of jobs, especially construction. Even though the majority of Italian immigrants settled in the big cities of the Northeast, some moved to Detroit and some moved to California, where they developed a large “Italian wine-making community” (Burgan, 2008, p. 43).

This immigration phenomenon has never stopped with another big wave occurring after World War II, and American cities have seen different waves of immigration until today. Nowadays, Italian immigration to the United States has considerably decreased since it is easier to move to a European country thanks to the European Union, but the immigration phenomenon to the US has not come to an end. The Italian immigrants who now arrive in the United States are mostly descendants of early immigrants, who join their relatives, or highly educated professionals.

Looking at the world-famous example of *Little Italy* in New York City, a pattern can roughly be drawn demonstrating how immigrants coming from the same cultural background

usually tend to stick together creating communities of people with whom they share the same values, beliefs, celebrations and, more importantly, the same language. Thus, “Italian neighborhoods in many cities are still significant sites for the transmission and enactment of cultural traditions throughout the generations” (De Fina & Fellin, 2010, p. 195).

Detroit is a case in point. The first wave of immigration from Italy dates back to 1880 (Woodford, 2001, p. 186), and the number of people that moved to this city grew considerably in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Suffice it to say that the Italian presence in Detroit increased from 900 people in 1904 to 42,000 in 1925 (p. 186). Among these people, a large number were from Sicily, probably one of the Italian regions that witnessed the biggest wave of mass emigration.

Even though the number of immigrants decreased significantly after the 1960s, immigration from Sicily to Detroit has never ended. The presence of earlier Sicilian immigrants, in fact, kept attracting newcomers during the last fifty years. As a consequence, we can find a large community of Sicilians in Detroit, mostly arriving from the coastal towns surrounding Palermo and primarily from the two neighboring villages of Terrasini and Cinisi.

Although sources concerning the Italian community, to the best of my knowledge, are not available at the time of writing, interviews and fieldwork yielded a wealth of reliable information. The Sicilian community of Detroit initially settled in the eastside area of the city (around the streets called Gratiot Avenue and Harper Avenue), in a neighborhood mainly inhabited by Italians, called “car-loop” but renamed “Cacalupo” after the peculiar pronunciation realized by Italian immigrants. With the city’s expansion, and with the arrival of other ethnic groups in the area, many Sicilians decided to move to quieter and smaller towns north of the city: Macomb and Clinton Township. Here the community does not share a common neighborhood

anymore as they once did when they lived in Cacalupo, but it is easy to find more than one family from Terrasini and Cinisi, and even from other Sicilian towns, in each neighborhood of the area (in bigger neighborhoods, it is not difficult to find 7-8 families originally from these Sicilian towns).

The area, however, offers some points of reference for the community: Vince & Joe's Gourmet Market, Dolce Gelato, Da Francesco's and Nonna's Italian Kitchen are only some of the most representative places. They are mainly shops, restaurants, cafes and supermarkets founded by people from Terrasini and/or Cinisi, where the majority of the workers are Sicilian (again, mostly from these two coastal towns). The members of the community, thus, can purchase from these shops what they need (e.g., typical Sicilian food), and they can also meet some fellow Sicilians.

The community, moreover, imported to Detroit many of the Sicilian cultural and religious traditions. Festivals and celebrations are usually organized by the clubs created by the community, e.g. *Club di Terrasini a Detroit* (Terrasini Club in Detroit), founded in 1977; *Club femminile e giovanile Madonna delle Grazie di Terrasini* (Women and Juvenile Club Virgin of the Miracles of Terrasini), founded in 193

5; *Società di Santa Fara* (Saint Fara Society), founded 1924, etc. Folkloric festivals, such as the *Festa di li Schietti*, are usually hosted by the Italian-American Cultural Society, a society "established in 1957 by a small group of dedicated visionaries, [who] dreamed of developing a meeting place where Italian Americans could gather to preserve their traditions, values, and customs" (from the society website <http://www.iacsonline.com/Home>). The *Festa di li Schietti*, in particular, is a unique festival celebrated in Terrasini during the Eastern Sunday (see Figure 1 and Figure 2.).



Figure 1. Festa di li schietti.  
Detroit, 2015



Figure 2. Festa di li schietti.  
Terrasini, 2016

Religious celebrations, on the other hand, are usually hosted by the Holy Family Catholic Church. The church, based in the center of Detroit in the Greektown area, was founded in 1907 by a group of thirty Sicilians (among whom many were from Terrasini and Cinisi) in order to create a church and a parish that could specifically serve the Sicilian immigrants living in town. The parish, whose priest is himself a Sicilian, hosts celebrations such as *Maria Santissima delle Grazie* (Virgin of the Miracles - patron saint of Terrasini), *Santa Fara* (Saint Fara – patron saint of Cinisi) and Saint Joseph (celebrated in all Italy but in particular in Sicily).

From a personal observation, it has been noticed that the community tends to use the Sicilian in almost all circumstances. In many cases, Sicilian is the first generation's native language (L1), while their knowledge of English is restricted to the structures useful to work, e.g., to talk with officers or to speak in public offices or to interact with native speakers of American English. Moreover, the presence of a great number of Sicilian stores, cafes and restaurants, where the majority of workers comes are fellow Sicilians, gives people with a poor

or mediocre knowledge of English the possibility to live their daily life without feeling the necessity to improve their English.

On the other hand, the case of the second generation seems to be more complex. Depending on the age, in fact, we could create a subcategory of second-generation speakers who are almost perfect bilinguals (American English and Sicilian/Regional Italian) and a subcategory of speakers who have just a passive knowledge of Sicilian/Italian and are not able to speak either Sicilian or Italian. The community, thus, displays a layered structure, which can be studied from different angles and perspectives.

This study focuses on the preservation, attrition and/or loss of the Sicilian phonological features in the dialect spoken by the Sicilian community living in Detroit. Through analysis of the data the current study describes the lexicon and phonological features of the dialect spoken by the Sicilian community, and evaluates whether these features are the same as those spoken in the subjects' hometowns of Terrasini and Cinisi (Sicily), and if so, how they may differ. The study also attempts to determine whether the Sicilians of Detroit are perceived by Sicilians living in Sicily as native-speakers or not, and what features may affect the judgment (e.g., pronunciation, intonation, foreign accent, vocabulary used). In the same way, the study also tries to determine whether the English spoken by the Sicilians living in Detroit is considered native-like, with particular regard to second generations.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of community, particularly *speech community*, is fundamental in sociolinguistics, having aroused the interests of many scholars in the field. While early sociolinguists contended that the speech community was created by people sharing the same language, Hymes (1967) opposed this simplistic definition and re-defined the speech community claiming that in order to be part of the same speech community speakers have to share the same “rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech, and the rules for the interpretation of at least one linguistic variety” (p. 36). Both sets of rules are required to claim membership in a given speech community. That is, in order to belong to the same speech community, sharing the same grammatical rules is not enough. On the contrary, speakers also have to share linguistic behaviors and the metalinguistic abilities necessary for the interpretation of at least one linguistic variety. On the basis of this definition we can categorize the Italian community in Detroit as a speech community since they share all the conditions prescribed by Hymes.

Although the Detroit community has never been studied, many scholars have analyzed the language aptitude, behaviors and choices of Italian communities around the world. The linguistic processes occurring in communities of Italian speakers have been the object of a case study by De Fina (2012), who analyzed the dialogues occurring between all the members of a Sicilian family living in Flushing, New York. The analyzed verbal interactions between members of the first, second and third generation of Sicilian immigrants confirm the pattern according to

which first-generation immigrants maintain Italian and/or Sicilian as the dominant language, while the second generation becomes dominant in English, but still displays native competence in Italian and/or the Sicilian dialect. The third generation, finally, shows just a passive competence in Italian or Sicilian, as had been previously noted by Del Torto (2008, p.80).

Another study that focuses on language maintenance and shift across different generations of Italian speakers is Finocchiaro (2004). In her PhD dissertation, Finocchiaro analyzed the speech and language attitudes of 38 subjects, belonging to one Sicilian family whose members moved respectively to the US, Australia and France. She focuses on the third generation of speakers, on their knowledge of Italian and on the contexts in which they use it, at the same time taking into consideration the national policies concerning language minorities in each hosting country.

Despite the presence of different studies about the Italian communities and their behaviors, it is not easy to find a study that focuses attention on the actual characteristics of the speech of the Italian community, i.e., their phonology, the lexicon and the presence or absence of a foreign accent in their speech.

The idea of foreign accent is defined as a “difference in pronunciation of a language by native and non-native speakers” (Flege, 1981, p. 445). Even though it is localized both in segmental, sub-segmental and supra-segmental levels, native listeners mostly perceive a speaker’s foreign accent at the segmental level, that is when dealing with “mispronunciation” of a consonant or a segmental sound (p. 445). Although listeners easily perceive the foreign accent, there is no evidence that its presence influences the comprehensibility of the speech. Munro & Derwing (1999), in fact, after testing the speech produced by ten ESL learners judged by native



speakers, concluded that there is no correlation between the degree of perceived foreign accent and comprehensibility of the speech (p. 304).

Different scholars have dedicated their studies to the perception and production of a second language (L2), focusing on the idea of “foreign accent” and trying to understand by what factors it is determined. Interestingly, it has been noted that foreign accent has been detected even in the speech of children (Flege, 1981, p. 447), calling into question the Critical Period Hypothesis (Lenneberg, 1967) which attributes the presence of a non-native accent in the L2 to the learning of the L2 after reaching puberty. The presence of a foreign accent both in the speech of children and adults could perhaps be better explained with the “phonological translation hypothesis” (Flege, 1981). The hypothesis postulates that the accent is given away by the presence of the speaker’s first language, and that the speaker tends to use a “phonological translation” from one language to the other (pp. 451-452). In other words, in the case of corresponding sounds between the native language (L1) and the target second language (L2), the speaker will substitute the L1 sound (or the L1 sound closest to the L2 one) for the L2 sounds, creating as a result the perception of a foreign accent<sup>1</sup>.

Flege (1985) goes beyond his *phonological translation hypothesis* with the formulation of the *Speech Learning Model* (SLM), which “aims to account for age-related limits on the ability to produce L2 vowels and consonants in a native-like fashion” (p. 238) by learners of an L2. This model is based on four postulates and on the following seven hypotheses:

“H1) Sounds in the L1 and L2 are related perceptually to one another at a position-sensitive allophonic level, rather than at a more abstract phonemic level;

H2) A new phonetic category [i.e. manner and place of articulation] can be established for an L2 sound that differs phonetically from the closest sound if bilinguals discern at

---

<sup>1</sup> This concept is very similar to the *Perceptual Assimilation Model* expressed by Best (1995) concerning the perception and categorization of sounds by naïve listeners.

least some of the phonetic differences between the L1 and L2 sounds.

H3) The greater the perceived phonetic dissimilarity between an L2 sound and the closest L1 sound, the more likely it is that phonetic differences between the sounds will be discerned.

H4) The likelihood of phonetic differences between L1 and L2 sounds, and between L2 sounds that are noncontrastive in the L1, being discerned decreases as AOL [age of learning] increases.

H5) Category formation for an L2 sound may be blocked by the mechanism of equivalence classification. When this happens, a single phonetic category will be used to process perceptually linked L1 and L2 sounds (diaphones). Eventually, the diaphones will resemble one another in production.

H6) The phonetic category established for L2 sounds by a bilingual may differ from a monolingual's if: 1) the bilingual's category is "deflected" away from an L1 category to maintain phonetic contrast between categories in a common L1-L2 phonological space; or 2) the bilingual's representation is based on different features, or feature weights, than a monolingual's.

H7) The production of a sound eventually corresponds to the properties represented in its phonetic category representation" (p. 239).

The SLM allows us to describe satisfactorily the processes involved in the learning of any L2 phonology, assessing that an important role in language learning is played by what the learner can perceive of the target language. As per the previous hypothesis, the SLM claims that when the L2 learners acquire a sound similar to an L1 sound, they will tend to use the L1 pronunciation, often resulting in a "mispronunciation" or foreign accent. The model, however, claims that by gaining experience, the learners can correctly identify the differences between the two sounds (p. 263), and that "the earlier L2 learning commences, the smaller the perceived phonetic distance needed to trigger the process of category formation" (p. 264).

Foreign accent has also been investigated by Flege, Munro and MacKay (1995) through a study on native Italian speakers living in Canada. The subjects, divided into different groups depending on the Age of Arrival (AOA), were tested on their English pronunciation. Their

performances were also presented to a group of native English speakers who judged the presence or absence of a foreign accent.

The results showed that the perceived foreign accent increases proportionally to a subject's age of learning, and that it is almost impossible to find speech without any trace of foreign accent if the language has been learned after a certain age. According to Flege et al. (1995), other factors that affect the L2 pronunciation and the presence or absence of a foreign accent are the length of residence (LOR), amount of use of the L2 and gender (p. 3133). The data, in fact, showed that female subjects who had learned English in their childhood had a better pronunciation than males with the same AOL, while the opposite scenario occurred if the subject had learned English in their late adolescence (p. 3132).

The well-known Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) (Lenneberg, 1967), on the other hand, is discussed by Flege, Frieda & Nozawa in their 1997 study. This study partially confirms the validity of this hypothesis, stressing at the same time the importance of the frequency/amount of usage of the L1. The scholars re-analyzed the data obtained by Flege et al. (1995), dividing the subjects into two groups on the basis of the amount of usage of their L1 during their daily routine, i.e., L1 high use (HiUse) vs L1 low use (LoUse). The results obtained show that there is not a strong correspondence with the age of learning, but, on the contrary, that there is one with the amount of L1 usage. That is, the amount of L1 use clearly affects the speaker's rate of foreign accent.

Both the subjects belonging to the L1 HiUse and LoUse had learned their L2 (English) at the same age, but the perceived foreign accent was stronger for the HiUse group. These results contradict the idea that "an individual's state of neurological maturation at the time of first exposure to the L2 determines how accurately the L2 will be pronounced" (Flege et al., 1997, p.

183), since the two groups of subjects had the same age at the time of their first exposure, but the L2 pronunciation between the two groups was not perceived to have the same level of accuracy. In light of this study, the Critical Period Hypothesis is not sufficient to explain the degree of foreign accent of L2 speakers, but rather other factors have to be taken into consideration, e.g., use of the L1 (p. 184).

The Critical Period Hypothesis is further criticized by Neufeld (1980), who claimed that the foreign accent could be caused by the learners' difficulty in pronouncing the L2 sounds, even though they know how these sounds should be pronounced. The problem, thus, is more psychomotor than psycholinguistic (p. 296).

Intonation is another element of pronunciation that contributes to the perception of foreign accent and one which the SLM model (Flege, 1995) does not address as it concerns the perception of segments. While intonation is simplistically described as the melody of the language, Crystal (1985) defines it as "the distinctive use of patterns of pitch, or melody" (p. 162), and it includes phonological features such as pitch, length, loudness, stress, accent, and rhythm. All these aspects can influence L2 production, giving rise to a foreign accent. Using rhythm as an example, in fact, it has been noticed that, contrary to stress-timed English, many of the world's languages are syllable-timed (such as French, Spanish, Japanese, Italian, and Yoruba); that is, the syllables (as opposed to timing determined by stress) occur regularly. In such languages, the total duration of a word or an utterance is therefore more dependent on the number of syllables it happens to contain than on the number and position of stressed syllables (Chun, 2002, p. 8). Such a difference could be the cause of foreign intonation, and thus, of a foreign accent. Another intonation pattern that could affect the detection of a foreign accent is alignment, or "the temporal synchronization of tones and segments" (D'Imperio, 2000, p. 10). It

has been noted, in fact, that despite the fact that in some cases languages such as English and Italian share the same type of falling intonation, the realization of the same falling intonation could sound different in the two languages. Taking as an example the city name of Mantova, Mennen (2006) explained that the native Italian pronunciation has an early peak while the English one has a late peak (p. 5). Thus, even though the non-native speakers make the correct phonological association, they fail in the production of the correct alignment, resulting in a foreign accent. Thus, in addition to segments, suprasegmentals such as intonation, particularly alignment, must be considered as possible markers of a non-native-like accent in the L2.

### **2.1 The Sicilian dialect spoken in Terrasini and Cinisi.**

When approaching the L2 phonology of native Sicilian subjects speaking English as an L2, it is important to highlight that Sicily, as most Italian regions, features a diglossic state (Alfonzetti, 1998). Terrasini and Cinisi are two villages of about twelve-thousand inhabitants each, located in the northwestern part of Sicily in the area surrounding Palermo, Sicily's largest city.

While Cinisi has a past of agriculture and farming, Terrasini previously based its economy on fishing, but nowadays both live off tourism and commerce. Since the economy of the two towns, as in all Sicily, has always witnessed highs and lows, immigration has always been an important phenomenon in the lives of Sicilians. The destinations of these immigrants were different: Germany, Belgium, England, and the United States, but wherever the destination was, people left their villages taking with them their culture and their dialect.



Figure 3. Map of Sicily showing the towns of Terrasini and Cinisi.

Due to their proximity (the two villages are literally next to one another) the Sicilian dialect spoken in the two towns differs just by some small negligible traits (these will not be analyzed in this study), but they mostly present the same phonological characteristics.

Here, based on the work of Ruffino (2006), the most important isoglosses of the two dialects are described below:

- Metaphony: diphthongization of the tonic vowels /e/ and /o/ into /je/ and /wo/ (/beddu/ → /bjeddu/ - ‘handsome’ or /boni/ → /bwoni/ - ‘good’). The phenomenon is originally a form of regressive assimilation due to the presence, in the same word, of a final vowel /i/ or /u/, e.g. /beddu/ → /bjeddu/ - ‘handsome’. While most of the Sicilian dialects preserved the phenomenon in its original form, the Sicilian spoken in the area of Palermo, including Terrasini and Cinisi, generalizes it to all contexts (/fedda/ → /fjedda/ - ‘slice’) (p. 45), including cases where the final vowel is not an /i/ or /u/.

- Transformation of /d/. As in almost all Sicilian dialects, the plosive alveolar /d/ is transformed to a trilled /r/ in front of vowels, e.g. /dare/ → /rari/ - ‘to give’; /dormire/ → /ruormiri/ - ‘to sleep’. In the case of proparoxytone words (i.e., with stress on the third to last syllable) a following /d/ is transformed into an unvoiced plosive alveolar /t/, e.g. /umido/ → /umitu/ - ‘humid’ (p. 48).
- The plosive velar /g/ tends to disappear when in initial position and followed by a vowel /a/, e.g. /gatto/ → /attu/ - ‘cat’, /gamba/ → /amma/ - ‘leg’ (p. 49).
- While in most Sicilian dialects an unvoiced consonant preceded by a nasal tends to turn into a voiced consonant (e.g. /tempo/ → /tembo/ - ‘time’), in the Terrasini and Cinisi dialect this change does not occur, e.g. /tempo/ → /tiempu/ (p. 52).
- As in all Sicilian dialects consonantal clusters containing /tr/ are pronounced as a retroflex:

/tr/ → /mat̚ʎi/ - ‘mother’

/ttr/ → /kwatt̚ʎu/ - ‘four’

/str/ → /ʃt̚ʎata/ - ‘street’

Table 1. Phonological constraints in Standard Italian and Sicilian.

CONSONANT CLUSTERS	ITALIAN	SICILIAN	ENGLISH	
/rl/ → /rr/	/parlare/ /Karlo/ /merlo/	/parrari/ /Karru/ /mierru/	to talk Carlo ( <i>name</i> ) blackbird	The second element of the consonantal cluster is assimilated by the first one that turns into a geminate consonant /rr/, i.e., progressive assimilation.
/mb/ → /mm/	/strambo/ /gambero/	/ʃtrammu/ /ammaru/	strange prawn	Again, progressive assimilation.
/nd/ → /nn/	/14alico/ /fondo/	/kwannu/ /funnu/	when bottom	Again, progressive assimilation.
/l+consonant/ → /w + consonant/	/alto/ /falso/ /calcio/ /caldo/	/awtu/ /fawsu/ /kawtʃu/ /kawru/	tall false kick hot	The first element of the constraint is transformed in /w/.

- As shown in Table 1, different Italian constraints found in Standard Italian are subject to assimilation in almost all Sicilian dialects, including the ones analyzed here (pp. 51-52):

## 2.2 What is diglossia in Sicily?

Sicily, as is the case in many other Italian regions, exists in a diglossic situation in which Standard Italian coexists with several dialects. As defined by Ferguson (1959):

“Diglossia is a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either of an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any sector of community for ordinary conversation” (p. 435).

Sicilians use the Sicilian dialect (lower standard) and Italian (high standard) daily, switching between the two varieties depending on the situation. We might even say that the language situation in Sicily, as well as in other Italian regions, is probably more complex than the one presented by Ferguson.

In Italy, in fact, the complementary distribution described by Ferguson is not as clear-cut as in the Haitian, Greek or Arabic cases cited by Ferguson. Thus, it is possible to hear Standard Italian or Regional Italian even in a very informal conversation (e.g., mother talking to her son or a conversation between friends). In the same way, dialect is still used even in formal situations, such as in public offices. This difference leads Berruto (1987) to propose the term *dilalia* to represent the linguistic condition of Italy. Standard Italian or Regional Italian, in fact, is not just



relegated to written and formal language, but coexists with the different local dialects also within informal and familiar contexts (p. 57).

This situation might have something to do with the historical origin of the Italian dilalic/diaglossic situation. What is now known as Standard Italian, in fact, was a neo-Latin dialect (the Florentine dialect of Dante Alighieri) elected as a national language on the basis of political and literary values (Berruto, 1989, p. 9). The Italian situation, as far as dialectal variation is concerned, is slightly different from the British and American one. Cerruti (2011, p. 9) describes it as follows: “the sociolinguistic situation of Italy is characterized by the presence of regional varieties of Italian, which is spoken alongside more than fifteen Italo-Romance dialects [among which Sicilian] and about fifteen historical linguistic minorities (besides a certain number of new linguistic minorities). Like the geographical dialects of British and American English, the regional varieties of Italian are varieties of the national language that are spoken in different geographical areas. They differ both from each other and from standard Italian at all levels of the language system, especially with regard to phonetics, phonology and prosody, and represent the Italian actually spoken in contemporary Italy. Common Italian speakers regularly speak a regional variety of Italian, which is termed regional Italian.” Each region has its form of *regional Italian*, which is in turn differentiated from a social point of view in “*educated regional Italian* and *popular regional Italian*” (Alfonzetti, 1998, p. 181). Thus, in each region there may be Standard Italian, one or two Regional Italians and one or more dialects spoken (see Table 2 for terminology comparison).

The different terminology usually employed in the Italian linguistic tradition can be confusing, since its concept of dialect is quite different from the English one and rather designates a variety of Italo-Romance genetically related to Standard Italian (which is, as above

mentioned, in itself the Italo-Romance dialect of Florence) but without any official recognition of status. See the following table:

Table 2. A comparison between standard linguistic terminology and its equivalent in the Italian linguistic tradition

STANDARD TERMINOLOGY	ITALIAN LINGUISTIC TRADITION
Standard English	Standard Italian
Dialect	Regional Italian
Genetically related language	Dialect

### 2.3 Research Questions:

The situation of dilalia mentioned above, thus, interacts with the processes of language aptitude, maintenance and erosion described in the literature review and in interesting ways and deserves more detailed analysis. However, due to the limitations, this study will try to answer the following questions:

1. Does the Sicilian dialect spoken by the community in Detroit differ from that spoken by the community in Terrasini and Cinisi?
2. Can the Sicilian spoken in Detroit be considered native-like by speakers in Sicily? Do native speakers in Terrasini and Cinisi perceive it as their own language, or another Sicilian dialect?
3. What are the phonological traits that trigger the perception of the variety as being non-native-like?

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Participants**

The subjects involved in the study are divided in three different groups: interviewees, control group and judgment task raters.

##### **3.1.1 Interviewees**

The first group is composed by twenty-two participants belonging to the Sicilian community living in Detroit. The subjects are men (n=14) and women (n=8) of different ages, sharing the same cultural background. They were either born in Sicily, in the towns of Terrasini and Cinisi, or in the United States from parents of Sicilian origin (again from Terrasini or Cinisi).

The fourteen participants who belong to the first-generation immigrant sub-group were all born in Sicily and grew up in a dilalic environment. That is, as previously noted in the above section, speakers in this group speak at least Sicilian dialect(s) and (Standard and/or Regional) Italian. The informants are eleven men and 3 women, whose ages range from 43 to 74 years, and who moved to the USA during their early adulthood (12-20 years) to settle in Detroit (MI), where they started a new job and a new life. Many of them did not go beyond the stage of middle education. Seven subjects, after arriving in Detroit, attended an English class provided by the “Italian American Cultural Society”. They studied for periods ranging from two months to one year. Those participants who did not attend any English class attested that they have learned English through contact with native speakers. Many of them, even though they have been living

in Detroit for 40 years, cannot be considered proficient, since their knowledge of English is limited to the vocabulary and expressions required in their job fields (most of them work in the construction industry). Three of them, actually, refused to answer questions in English, stating that it was too difficult for them to engage in a conversation in English.

Subjects belonging to the second generation have also been interviewed. They are five women and three men (age range: 23-60 years old) born of parents coming from Terrasini and Cinisi. Some of them have spent part of their life in Sicily. One of them goes to Sicily for one month every year for the summer vacation. Others spend two or three months of their summer vacations every three years there, and one had lived in Terrasini for almost two years from the age of twenty-seven years. The others only visited their parents' hometown during their childhood, thirty or even forty years ago.

The twenty-two interviews were conducted thanks to the help of some friends who are active members of the Sicilian community in Detroit. They have been essential mediators who granted access to other members of the Sicilian community and to some of its most important cultural and religious events, such as the celebration of Maria Santissima delle Grazie (The Virgin of the Miracles). As will be described in the next section, the interviews were conducted in Sicilian or Italian (depending on the interviewee's preference) and in English.

### **3.1.2 Control Group**

The second group that took part in the study is composed of Sicilian and American native speakers living in Sicily and of American English native speakers. The Sicilian control group consists of four Sicilian/Italian native speakers living in Sicily. Two of them are from Terrasini, one was born in another Sicilian town but moved to Terrasini at the age of fourteen, and one is

from a southern Sicilian town whose dialect is characterized by markedly different phonological and lexical traits from that of Terrasini and Cinisi.

The two participants in the control group employed for the American-English judgment task are an American native speaker who lives in Oxford (MS) and an Italian native speaker living and working in Mississippi, who has been living in the US for almost three years. The Italian control has been added in order to understand whether the judges could perceive a foreign accent even in a very proficient speaker of English.

### **3.1.3 Judgment task raters**

The third group of participants is composed of the raters who took part in the Sicilian and American English judgment task. These subjects have been chosen from among personal acquaintances in Terrasini and Cinisi and in the United States (mostly in Oxford, Mississippi).

For the Sicilian judgment task, I asked 14 subjects, whose age ranges from eighteen to about sixty-eight years, to take part in the study. They are Sicilian men and women who have always lived only in Terrasini or Cinisi. They have different educational backgrounds, ranging from high school to university master's degree.

The raters selected for the American English judgment task are eleven subjects with an age range from eighteen to about sixty years. They are all currently living in Mississippi, but they grew up in different parts of the United States, in particular: Ohio, Minnesota, Virginia, Texas, Illinois, New Mexico and Mississippi. All these raters have a high educational level, since they are all university students or university teachers.

## **3.2 Method**

As will be described in details in the next section, recorded interviews have been used in order to collect data for this study. The interviews were conducted singularly, and they involved

questions concerning different topics about the interviewees' life in the United States and their language background (see Appendix A). The participants were also asked to count from 1 to 20 and to narrate a story from an illustrated book.

The interviews have subsequently been coded and carefully analyzed in order to note down any perceived phonological variation and to draw a description of the phonological features used by the subjects in both languages.

For the second part of the study, brief excerpts were selected from the above-mentioned interviews. These excerpts were then used to administer a judgment task to the raters in order to investigate the perception of nativeness for both the Sicilian and English spoken by the members of the first group of interviewees. All the subjects and the controls have been included in the Sicilian judgment task. As we will see in details in the following section, some subjects did not accept to be interviewed in English. Their interviews, as a consequence, could not be used for the American English judgment task.

The results of the analysis by the researcher and of the judgment tasks have moreover been compared, in order to ascertain whether native speaker judgments matched the results of formal linguistic analysis conducted by the researcher. These results, finally, underwent statistical analysis to establish whether any trends occurred.

### **3.3 Procedure**

#### **3.3.1 Interviews**

The study started with the collection of data from the first group of participants. Some interviews took place in Sicily, during the participants' summer vacations, while others took place in Detroit. The visit to Detroit involved a period of three days spent staying at the house one of the most prominent family of the Sicilian community of the city. As previously

mentioned, this family not only has been very helpful to get in touch and interview people of the community, but also to directly experience some aspects of community life. Three days, of course, are not sufficient to run an ethnographic study. Nonetheless, this short period provided the opportunity to form an idea of the lifestyle of Sicilians in Detroit and to take part in the celebration of “Maria Santissima delle Grazie” (The Virgin of Miracles), patron Saint of Terrasini.

All the interviews have been recorded at a private house or office (usually the subject’s house or office).

The interviews were divided in two parts. The first part was held in Sicilian or Italian, depending on the varieties spoken by the interviewee as determined by the answers to an oral questionnaire (see Appendix A). The questions asked focused on the interviewees’ life in the USA, their relationship with Mainland Italy, their language background, the Sicilian festivals and religious celebrations in Detroit (i.e., when they are celebrated, what is involved in the celebration, what kind of food people eat on such occasions, what are the traditions linked to the feast, etc.)

Participants were then asked to count from 1 to 20, in order to obtain the most possible spontaneous language items that can be compared to one another (counting, in fact, does not usually involve a lot of processing and provides the same set of numbers, which makes comparison between different speakers relatively straightforward).

Finally, the subjects were shown Mercer Mayer’s (1969) illustrated book *Frog Where are you?* (which only contains pictures, without any written story) and asked to narrate the story they were seeing. Some of the participants started narrating in Sicilian/Italian and after a while

continued in English, while others narrated the story twice: first in Sicilian/Italian and then in English.

All the subjects had been informed that their interviews would be used to run a study on the Sicilian community of Detroit, without specifying that the focus was on their language usage. Some of the participants were initially intimidated by the microphone, but all were happy to take part in the study. Three subjects of the first generation refused to narrate the story in English, as they claimed that it was too difficult for them, even though they had been living in Detroit for 35 and 53 years. For three other subjects (two from the first-generation group and one from the second) the English narration could not be used for the judgment task, since the constant code-switching made it impossible to select sentences which were exclusively narrated in English. Eight subjects, three belonging to the first generation and five to the second, answered the questions using Sicilian Regional Italian instead of Sicilian dialect.

### **3.3.2 Judgment tasks**

In order to test the nativeness of the participants, some excerpts of the interview were presented to a group of raters (both Sicilian and American native speakers), who expressed their perception of the speaker's nativeness in Sicilian or American English, respectively.

The judgment task took place in a quiet place (the subject's house or the interviewer's office or house), and in some cases small groups of two or three raters completed the task at the same time. The judges were asked to listen to some excerpts from the interviews and to fill in a written questionnaire. The length of the excerpts ranged from fifteen to twenty seconds, with a couple of shorter exceptions, and all of them were carefully chosen avoiding any vocabulary or



interjection that could bias the raters' judgment (e.g. English words, lexical items peculiar to Italian-American variety and interjection during the Sicilian interviews, and vice versa).

The questionnaire was composed of four questions. The first two questions, "Do you think this person is nice and pleasant?" and "Do you think this person is educated?" are linked to the concept of *Perceptual Dialectology* (Preston, 1989). At the same time, however, they were also meant to distract the listener from the linguistic task: to judge the subjects' origins based on their speech. Both questions presented four possible answers following a Likert scale from one to four (from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree").

The raters were then asked to answer the question about the subjects' origin, "Where is this person from?". For this question, both the Italian-Sicilian version and the English version provided five possible answers: Terrasini, Cinisi, another place in Sicily, first-generation Sicilian immigrant, second-generation Sicilian immigrant for the former, and Northern USA, Southern USA, other English speaking country, first-generation immigrant, second-generation immigrant for the latter<sup>2</sup>. Finally, judges were required to motivate their choice for the subject's origin. For the American-English version, the possible reasons were: grammar used, intonation, rhythm of the speech, vocabulary, and pronunciation, with an additional space for any possible notes. The Italian-Sicilian version of the questionnaire, on the contrary, did not present any possible choices, but left the judges complete freedom to write their motivation. This difference was due to the different environment in which the tasks had been performed. As mentioned above, in fact, the Sicilian judges came from very different cultural backgrounds. The employment of labels such as intonation, rhythm, pronunciation would have inevitably drawn on a metalinguistic awareness that could not just be taken for granted in some of the judges, especially the older one.

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<sup>2</sup> The questionnaire (see Appendix B) also provided an extra space, to add any comments or examples, which has been used by many raters to express further details about the speakers' origin (Mid-West, African American, etc.).

Before starting, the task and the questionnaire were explained to each rater. In particular, explanation was focused on some points that might have not been clear, such as how the Likert scale answer worked, the possibility to mark more than one answer for the last question about the rater's motivation (just for the American-English task). The possible answers concerning the subjects' origins were also explained in details. Some answers, moreover, needed to be clarified in order to avoid any bias (e.g. the answers "Northern and Southern America" were meant as "northern and southern areas of the USA, and, since these are labels are not used in Sicily, a clarification of the difference between first- and second-generation immigrants was provided).

## CHAPTER 4

### DATA

#### 4.1. Sicilian judgment task data.

The subjects' interviews, as mentioned in the above paragraphs, have been analyzed by the researcher and then used to run the two judgment tasks.

As far as the perception concerning the speakers' origins, the Sicilian raters yielded the following data in Table 2:

Table 3. Percentage of correct answers concerning the subject's origin, according to the Sicilian raters

	<b>Control Group (4 people)</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Generation (14 people)</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Generation (8 people)</b>
<b>Raters' correct answers</b>	55.35%	10.35%	21.42%

As shown in Table 3, for 55.35% of the Sicilian speakers less than 20 seconds of speech were enough to correctly perceive the origins of the control group. The percentage decreases to 21.42% for the second-generation group, and drops even lower as far as the first-generation group is concerned with only 10.35% of correct answers on the subjects' origin.

As Table 4 clearly shows, there is a great difference between the answers of the junior raters (age 25-45) and those of the senior raters (over 45) as far as the second-generation group is concerned.

Table 4. Data on second-generation subjects divided by raters' age

	<b>Junior Raters 25-45</b>	<b>Senior Raters Over 45</b>
<b>Perceived as 2<sup>nd</sup> generation</b>	30%	0%
<b>Perceived as 1<sup>st</sup> generation</b>	43.75%	37.5%
<b>Perceived as from another place in Sicily</b>	8.75%	15.63%
<b>Perceived as from Terrasini/Cinisi</b>	17.50%	46.88%

Interestingly, in fact, the junior raters group scored a higher percentage of correct answers related to second-generation subjects. For example, 73.75%% of the junior raters perceived the speakers as Sicilian immigrants, compared to 37.5% of the senior raters. In particular, 30% of the junior raters correctly perceived these subjects as second generation while 43.75% of the raters thought that they were listening to a first-generation immigrant. The senior raters, on the contrary, never associated these excerpts to a second-generation immigrant (0%), but in some cases (37.5%) they rated them as first-generation ones.

This difference between young and senior raters persisted also with regard to the perception of the subjects as fellow citizens of the two towns of Terrasini and Cinisi. For example, 46.88% of the senior judges rated the speakers as fellow citizens, while just 17.50% of the junior raters recognized them as fellow citizens.

Data related to the first-generation group as seen in Table 5, on the contrary, are very similar for both the junior and the senior raters. For both groups of raters, in fact, the percentage of speakers perceived as Sicilian first-generation immigrants was quite low (11.59% and 7.41%, respectively) while a high percentage of judges (64.49% of the juniors and 57.41% of the seniors) perceived the subjects as being from Terrasini and Cinisi.

Table 5. Data on first-generation subjects divided by rater's age

	<b>Junior Raters 25-45</b>	<b>Senior Raters over 45</b>
<b>Perceived as 2<sup>nd</sup> generation</b>	0.72%	1.85%
<b>Perceived as 1<sup>st</sup> generation</b>	11.59%	7.41%
<b>Perceived as from another place in Sicily</b>	23.19%	33.33%
<b>Perceived as from Terrasini/Cinisi</b>	64.49%	57.41%

Generally speaking, moreover, the two groups of raters showed a common trend when explaining the reason behind their answers. Even though not all the judges were able to justify their choices about the speakers' origin, 40.68% of the ones that were able to justify their choices explained that their answers were motivated by the speakers' accent (in particular, they differentiated "American accent" or "foreign accent" and "same accent as mine"); 23.73% of raters' choices were motivated by the vocabulary used (e.g. Sicilian old-fashion words nowadays considered obsolete), 13.56% indicated that the grammar used by the speakers influenced their choice, 11.86% of the judges were triggered by the pronunciation (mostly of numbers and vowels), 8.47% explained that the speaker's intonation helped them to answer the origin question, and 1.69% of the raters said that their decision was motivated by some vocal inflection of the speakers (however vague this definition might sound).

#### **4.2. American-English judgment task data.**

As far as the American-English judgment task is concerned, data show an opposite trend compared with the data of the Sicilian judgment task. As shown in Table 6, in fact, the American judges scored a higher number (53.53%) of correct answers concerning the origin of the first-generation group than that of the second-generation (just 12.12%).

Table 6. Percentage of correct answers concerning the subject's origin, according to the American-English raters.

	<b>Control Group (2 people)</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Generation (14 people)</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Generation (8 people)</b>
<b>Raters' correct answers</b>	68.18%	53.53%	12.12%

For the American-English task, it was not possible to divide the raters according to their age, since the relative homogeneity of their ages did not allow such a division. On a practical level, this provides an opportunity to show the data concerning the first and second generation in a single table, making the comparison easier.

Table 7. Data on first and second-generation subjects.

	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Generation</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Generation</b>
<b>Perceived as 2<sup>nd</sup> generation</b>	12.12%	16.16%
<b>Perceived as 1<sup>st</sup> generation</b>	1.51%	53.53%
<b>Perceived as from another English-speaking country</b>	0%	1.01%
<b>Perceived as from Northern USA</b>	77.27%	15.15%
<b>Perceived as from Southern USA</b>	9.09%	14.14%

Table 7 clearly shows that second-generation subjects are more often perceived as American-English native speakers (86.36% of the time). In particular, 77.27% of the time they are associated with a northern American dialect, which is, in fact, the dialectal area in which they grew up. On the contrary, in only 12.12% of the answers judges rated them as second-generation immigrants.

Data related to the first-generation subjects are less clear-cut. Even though 53.53% of the time they are rated as first-generation immigrants, other data show that judges were less sure about the subjects' origin. The 16.16% of them, in fact, rated them as second-generation

immigrant, and 29.29% (almost perfectly divided between northern and southern American) perceived them as American-English native speakers.

Table 8. Raters' answers on perceived country of origin of first- and second-generation Sicilian immigrants in the Detroit area, when not perceived as native speakers of American English

<b>Perceived origin of first and second-generation subjects.</b>	
<b>Latino</b>	52,94%
<b>Italian</b>	19,61%
<b>Russian</b>	1,96%
<b>Greek</b>	3,92%
<b>Middle East</b>	5,88%
<b>North European</b>	1,96%
<b>South European</b>	9,80%
<b>Asian</b>	3,92%

Interestingly enough, 52.94% of the raters who perceived speakers (both first and second generation) as non-native speakers, claimed that they were Latinos or originally from a Spanish-speaking country. Only 19.61% of the raters recognized the subjects as first- or second-generation Italians (see Table 8).

Raters, moreover, claimed that their choices were mainly influenced by the speaker's pronunciation (39.06%) and their intonation and rhythm of speech (respectively 21.41% and 17.88%). The other factors that have been taken in consideration were grammar use and vocabulary (mainly English words defined as uncommon by the raters), respectively 11.29% and 10.35%.

Table 9. Factors that motivate the judges' choice about speakers' origin

<b>Grammar Used</b>	<b>11,29%</b>
<b>Intonation</b>	21,41%
<b>Rhythm</b>	17,88%
<b>Vocabulary</b>	10,35%
<b>Pronunciation</b>	39,06%

## CHAPTER 5

### ANALYSIS

The above-mentioned results present interesting data that require an in-depth analysis. It is possible to summarize the main points that emerged as follows:

- There is an important difference between the Sicilian junior and senior raters in their perception of the second-generation subjects living in Detroit;
- Results on the perception of the first-generation group, on the contrary, are very similar for both groups of Sicilian judges;
- Accent is the most recurring factor that Sicilian judges mentioned to explain their rates;
- American raters scored a very high percentage of correct answers concerning the origins of both first- and second-generation groups. However, 13.63% of raters still perceive the second-generation as non-native speakers, denoting a pattern that differs from the one previously noted in other Sicilian communities;
- Intonation is the most recurring factor, among all the possible features (including grammar and vocabulary), that helped American judges to decide the subjects' origin;
- American raters mainly perceived the subjects as coming from a Spanish-speaking country, while a slightly lower percentage of judges recognized the subject's Italian origin.



The first point that stands out is the remarkable difference between the ratings given by Sicilian junior and senior raters with regard to the second-generation subject group. We find that 30% of the junior raters correctly perceived the subjects as second generation while 43.75% rated them as first-generation immigrants. The senior raters, on the contrary, never associated the voice they heard to a second-generation immigrant (0%), but a substantial group (37.5%) perceived them as first-generation immigrants, and 46.88% of the senior judges rated the speakers as fellow citizens of Terrasini and Cinisi, in opposition to the 17.50% of the junior raters.

This difference might be explained by the fact that seniors, despite being generally thought to have more conservative views about dialect, still perceive immigrants as speakers who undergo quite dramatic processes of language erosion and, eventually, loss. Moving abroad, in fact, is seen as something that deeply modifies someone's identity. The figure of the Sicilian immigrant in North Europe and the US is, indeed, a recurring theme in both the folklore and literary Sicilian tradition (e.g., suffice it to name the literary piece "La zia d'America" [the American aunt] by Leonardo Sciascia), in which immigrants, and the language they use (mainly their pronunciation and intonation), are usually described in a very caricatural way. According to this point of view, therefore, a major process of language erosion must affect both first- and second-generation speakers, creating *linguistic expectations* that are often disappointed (as shown by the Sicilian senior raters). Language erosion, in fact, is softened by a constant contact with the homeland (thanks to technology that provides easy and cheap access to phone calls, television programs and online books and newspapers) and affects first- and second-generation speakers in different ways and to different degrees (De Fina, 2012; Del Torto, 2008), misleading the Sicilian senior raters with regard to their perception of the subject's alleged origins. It is

possible that the senior raters, when listening to the recordings, do not associate many of the speakers to second-generation immigrants since they do not recognize any of the typical features that, according to the Sicilian point of view, characterize immigrants' speech (use of old-fashioned Sicilian vocabulary, use of American-English interjections, etc.).

From a personal observation, and comparing the behavior of the same Sicilian Americans in Detroit and when visiting their hometowns, moreover, can be noticed that, when in Sicily, subjects tend to use different language patterns and to code-switch to a greater extent than they use to do in the United States. A possible explanation for this behavior could be that Sicilian immigrants tend to stress their Sicilian origin in the United States but, in the same way, tend to stress their newly acquired American identity and their more prestigious social status when visiting their hometowns.

Junior raters, on the contrary, were born in an era in which travel habits and patterns already differed from what the previous generations had witnessed, i.e. situations in which the voyage to the US was less easy and affordable, and migrating was an almost definitive decision. It is thus quite probable that younger generations grew up with expectations (concerning the linguistic nature of immigrants to the US) that substantially differed from those of their fathers and that, as a consequence, did not bias their judgment.

The (quite obvious) fact that the two different groups of raters judge the subjects on the basis of their expectations and linguistic biases might be corroborated by the analysis of the data emerging from ratings concerning first-generation speakers. When the judges listen to subjects belonging to the first generation, in fact, both groups show considerable difficulties in recognizing the speakers as immigrants and, most of the times, they rate them as Sicilian native

speakers that never left Cinisi and Terrasini, since the degree of language erosion presented in the subject's speech is much lower than expected.

It is equally interesting that the majority of the Sicilian judges (61.02%) answered the open-ended questions using the following expression:

- “his/her intonation makes me think he/she is from Cinisi” (Judge 1)
- “he/she talks like me” (Judge 5)
- “his/her accent is very Sicilian-American” (Judge 2)
- “I can hear a weird pronunciation of numbers” (Judge 14)

These comments support the idea that phonology is one of the main factors that motivate the perception of a subject as native or non-native like.

With regards to the American-English judgment task, data shows that American raters mainly perceive the second-generation speakers as American English native speakers, confirming the pattern described by Del Torto (2008, p. 80), according to which the second generation, despite maintaining an active competence in Sicilian and/or Italian, has English as their dominant language. The judgment task results, however, show that a 13.68% of raters did not consider the subjects as native speakers, but perceived that they were born from immigrant parents. This data arouse a particular interest since it goes against all the previous literature about Sicilian communities abroad claiming that, as presented in the above paragraphs, second-generation speakers are English dominant with either an active or passive knowledge of Italian and Sicilian.

The recurring motivations for the judges' choices are, again, linked to phonology. We see that 78.35% of raters, in fact, claimed that they evaluated the subjects on the basis of their pronunciation, intonation and rhythm of speech. Even within the small but significant group of

judges that did not recognize the second generation as native-speakers we see a focus on their ratings of the phonological features that characterize the subject's speech. The majority of the raters, in fact, claimed that, they chose the "second-generation immigrant" option because of the subject's intonation and pronunciation. Unfortunately, judges did not specify more, making the analysis of this factor much more complicated.

As far as the last point is concerned, raters mainly identified the participants in the study as coming from a Spanish-speaking country. This fact could be explained on different grounds. The first reason might lie in the fact that the American raters who took part in the task, even though coming from different parts of the United States, are all living in Mississippi where a consistent presence of immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries is present. Italian communities, on the contrary, are usually small and scattered and this might have affected the judges' evaluation. A second explanation for this factor is that both Italian (and Sicilian) and Spanish are Romance languages, and as such, both are syllable-timed languages as opposed to the stress-timed nature of English (Chun, 2002), which probably triggers this kind of identification. This connection might be indirectly confirmed by the fact that a high percentage of raters motivated their choice on the base of phonological reasons (i.e., intonation and rhythm together make up 39.29% of the total motivations chosen by judges).

## CHAPTER 6

### NUMBERS PRONUNCIATION: A BRIEF CASE STUDY.

As shown by the above data, the majority of the Sicilian judges claimed that the main factor that triggered their perception was the speakers' phonology (about 60% when summing up all the phonological factors listed by the judges: accent, pronunciation, intonation). These observations suggest the possibility of conducting a simple case study analyzing in more details the production of numbers by the subjects. As stated above, in fact, counting not only involves a low cognitive process but it provides data that are easily comparable. Moreover, numbers contain many of the phonologic features that characterize the Sicilian dialect.

In order to analyze the data, the subjects who, in the Sicilian judgment task, obtained the higher rating of nonnative-like speech and the control group have been selected and transcribed.

As expected, the first-generation subjects did not present any significant variation in their pronunciation of numbers, compared to the production for the control group subjects. For this reason, a sample (coded DTP1) was provided to exemplify their realization of numbers from 1 to 20, which exactly matches the transcript of the Sicilian control group. On the contrary, many subjects of the second-generation group presented various degrees of variation in their production of numbers.

The transcriptions of numbers shown in Table 10 below present a selection of four subjects (coded: DTS1, DTS2, DTS3, DCS1) whose production of numbers includes the most common variations noticed in the speech of second-generation immigrants.

The first aspect to be noted is that, out of four second-generation subjects, two started counting using Sicilian (the language spoken during the interview), while the other two, on the contrary, used Italian even though the interview started out with questions asked in Sicilian, a pattern that they continued to follow during the entire interview. The reason behind this choice might be explained on the basis of the subjects' linguistic background since the two interviewees who used Italian also stated that they had attended an Italian school in Terrasini during one of their longest stays in that Sicilian town. Their production of numbers, however, still presents interesting variation due to contact with Sicilian (the language they speak in their daily lives) and to the fact that they are English-dominant.

Table 10. Transcripts of numbers produced by selected subjects

#	Italian Controller	Sicilian Controller	DTP1 1st gen.	DTS1 2nd gen.	DCS1 2nd gen.	DTS2 (ita) 2nd gen.	DTS3 (ita) 2nd gen.
1	uno	unu	unu	unu	ɔno	uno	uno
2	due	ruwi	ruwi	ruwi	dwi	due	due
3	tre	tʃi	tʃi	tʃi	t <sup>h</sup> ii	tre	tre
4	kwat:ro	kwaʃ:ru	kwaʃ:ru	kwaʃ:ru	kwaʃ:ru	kwat:ro	kwat:ro
5	tʃɪnkwe	*ʃɪnku	*ʃɪnku	*ʃɪnku	ʃɪnku	tʃɪnkwe	tʃɪnkwe
6	sei	sei	sei	sei	sei	sei	sei
7	set:e	s <sup>l</sup> et:ɪ	s <sup>l</sup> et:ɪ	s <sup>l</sup> et:e	set:e	set:e	[set:e
8	ot:o	ot:ɔ	ot:ɔ	ot:ɔ	ot:ɔ	ot:o	ot:o
9	nove	n <sup>w</sup> ɔvi	n <sup>w</sup> ɔvi	n <sup>w</sup> ɔvi	nɔvi	nɔve	nɔve
10	djetʃi	*r <sup>l</sup> efi	*r <sup>l</sup> efi	*r <sup>l</sup> efi	*defi	*djeti	*djeti
11	unditʃi	*un:ɪʃi	*un:ɪʃi	*un:ɪʃi	*un:ɪʃi	*unditi	*unditi
12	doditʃi	*durɪʃi	*durɪʃi	*durɪʃi	*durɪʃi	*doditi	*doditi
13	treditʃi	*tʃiɪɪʃi	*tʃiɪɪʃi	*tʃiɪɪʃi	tʃiɪɪʃi	*tʃediti	*trediti
14	kwat:orditʃi	*kwat:ordɪʃi	*kwat:ordɪʃi	*kwat:ordɪʃi	*kwatɔ:ɪdɪʃi	*kwat:ædɪʃi:	*kwatordɪʃi
15	kwinditʃi	*kwin:ɪʃi	*kwin:ɪʃi	kwin:ɪsɪ	*kwin:ɪʃi	*kwin <sup>d</sup> ɪʃi:	*kwinditi
16	seditʃi	*siriʃi	*siriʃi	*siriʃi	*sidiʃi	*sediti	*sediti
17	ditʃas:et:e	*riʃas: <sup>l</sup> et:ɪ	*riʃas: <sup>l</sup> et:ɪ	*diʃis <sup>l</sup> ete	*diʃiset:e	*diʃaset:e	*diʃes:et:e
18	ditʃɔt:o	riʃot:ɔ	riʃot:ɔ	diʃ <sup>ɔ</sup> ot:ɔ	diʃot:o	*diʃɔt:o	*diʃɔt:o
19	ditʃan:ɔve	*riʃ <sup>ɔ</sup> en: <sup>w</sup> ɔvi	*riʃ <sup>ɔ</sup> en: <sup>w</sup> ɔvi	*diʃ <sup>ɔ</sup> en <sup>w</sup> ɔvi	-----	*diʃ <sup>ɔ</sup> an: <sup>w</sup> ɔve	*diʃen:ɔve
20	venti	vinti	vinti	vinti	vinti	vɛ <sup>l</sup> nti	venti

Looking at the transcriptions of the numbers using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), we can see that variation starts occurring more frequently after the number ten, probably because composed numbers (i.e., one plus ten (11), two plus ten (12), etc.) seemingly require a higher processing load, which in turn increases the rate of variation. The phonemes that are more affected by variation are the following:

- geminate consonants
- /r/
- vowels

IPA transcriptions show that the non-target-like pronunciation of geminate consonants is one of the traits in which variation is consistent throughout all second-generation speakers and which probably triggered the perception of non-nativeness in the judges' evaluation of the subjects. This variation mainly occurs in numbers containing two consecutive geminate consonants (e.g., /ditʃas:et:e/ and /rifas:jet:i/ - 'seventeen'). Even though the majority of the subjects tend to preserve the last geminate consonant and lose the first one (as shown by the transcriptions representing the production of the two subjects, DCS1 and DTS2), there are some extreme cases (e.g., DTS1) in which both the geminate consonants are lost.

Another interesting difference in the pronunciation affects the consonant /r/. This consonant is realized, in Standard Italian, as a voiced alveolar trill [r], a phoneme absent in American English (Jensen, 1993, p. 28). In Sicilian it is realized as in Standard Italian or, in some cases, as a retroflex, e.g. when in the retroflex consonant cluster [tʃ]. Given this array of possible realizations, thus, a certain variation in the pronunciation of this phoneme was naturally expected. These expectations, in fact, have not been disappointed and, even though the first generation did not present any variation, second-generation speakers did, particularly DTS2 and

DCS1. The speaker DTS2 shows only a slight variation in the pronunciation of the number fourteen, realized in Italian as /kwat:orditʃi/ and in Sicilian as \*/kwat:ordʃi/, while the subject produces \*[kwat:ə-dʃi:]. The vowel realized by the speaker is barely audible and the sound she produces could be described as a rhotic vowel /ə/ typical of American English, but totally absent in the Italian and Sicilian phonological systems.

The other second-generation speaker (DCS1), on the other hand, displays variation in almost every realization of /r/. The subject tends to produce a voiced alveolar flap [ɾ] in intervocalic position (e.g., ‘twelve’ \*/duɾiʃi/, ‘thirteen’ \*/tʃiɾiʃi/) while in the initial position the phoneme is usually realized as a voiced alveolar stop /d/, following the pattern of the Italian pronunciation of numbers. With regards to the retroflex consonant cluster /tʃ/, she produces a voiced alveolar approximant /ɹ/ (i.e., American /r/), thus realizing the consonant cluster as /tʃɹ/. This last phoneme, moreover, displays another interesting example of variation. The speaker, in fact, tends to produce the retroflex voiceless alveolar stop as an aspirated voiceless alveolar stop, a sound which is absent from the Italian and Sicilian phonology system. These traits probably account for the fact that none of the Sicilian judges evaluated her as a fellow citizen of Terrasini and Cinisi, and that 71.42% of the judges evaluated her as a first or second-generation immigrant to the United States. Although data are not sufficient to draw definitive conclusions about the reasons behind DCS1’s linguistic realization, two tentative explanations will be attempted. The first draws on the theory of the psychomotor problem introduced by Neufeld (1980), according to which the participant’s “mispronunciation” of the consonant cluster /tʃ/, uncommon in American English, could be related to a difficulty in articulating this L2 sound (p. 296). On the other hand, it could be possible that the subject perceives this sound as similar to the American /tʰɹ/ and, thus, she tends to use the L1 pronunciation as explained by the Flege’s SLM (1985).



Other samples of variation were detected in the realization of vowels by second-generation speakers. In many cases, vowels undergo a process of diphthongization, as in the realization of the subject coded DTS1's production of numbers, e.g. 'seventeen' [dɪʃɪsjetɛ], 'eighteen' [dɪʃjot:ɔ], 'nineteen' [dɪʃjɛnɔvɪ] 'nineteen'. It is not easy to explain the reasons behind such a variation, but a possibility might be that the speaker overgeneralized the metaphony present in the realization of the number seven 'seven' /sʲɛt:ɪ/, characteristic of the Sicilian spoken in Terrasini and Cinisi, to other contexts.

The case of diphthongization displayed by speaker DTS2, on the other hand, requires the analysis of a larger corpus. DTS2 (one of the speakers that used Italian instead of Sicilian), in fact, produces the number twenty as [vɛ<sup>i</sup>ntɪ] instead of the Italian [venti]. It is clear that any attempt at explaining this diphthongization should be based on further research. In particular, it would be interesting to analyze the subject's production of other Italian or Sicilian words that contain the same vowels, in order to investigate whether this variation is caused by interference with American English. Standard Italian, moreover, distinguishes between open /ɛ/ and closed /e/, and the two vowels create minimal pairs. This distinction, however, is absent from many varieties of Southern Italian, including the Sicilian dialect and Sicilian Regional Italian. It should be noted that regional variants of Italian, especially from a pronunciation point of view, are the normal medium of instruction in Italy as a whole. It is thus possible that the speaker did not acquire the difference between the two vowels and consequently overgeneralizes the open one.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

The analysis and discussion of the data presented above allow us to draw some preliminary conclusions.

Twenty-two subjects belonging to the Sicilian community living the Detroit area (all coming from the two coastal towns of Terrasini and Cinisi) have been interviewed, both in Sicilian/Italian and in English, in order to obtain data to be used to run two judgment tasks. For the first judgment task, Sicilian native speakers (living in Terrasini and Cinisi) were asked to evaluate the speech of the subjects focusing on the perception of their degree of pleasantness and instruction and their supposed origin. Moreover, judges were asked to motivate their answers concerning the participant's origin (e.g., pronunciation, grammar used, etc.). The second task replicates the first one, but focusing on the variety of English produced by our interviewees. The judges, in this case, were selected among native speakers of American English.

The results obtained show that Sicilian judges tend to rate the subjects on the basis of their expectations and linguistic biases, which differ according to the judge's age and the cultural and social context in which they grew up. This is principally highlighted by the fact that senior judges tended to have more difficulties in recognizing the second-generation subjects from the first-generation ones, possibly due to the fact that their *ideal* immigrant should show significant traces of language erosion.

The second judgment task, on the other hand, brought to light that, for the majority of the judges, the subjects follow the pattern elaborated by previous studies on Sicilian communities, according to which the first-generation maintained Italian/Sicilian as their dominant language while the second generation is English dominant with active knowledge of Italian. It is, however, very important to note that a minority of judges not only did not perceive the second-generation subjects as English dominant, but claimed that the speakers' phonological features were different from the those of a native speaker of American English.

The results of the two tasks also show that both American and Sicilian raters based their evaluations on phonological clues perceived in the subjects' speech. In particular, the judges refer to pronunciation, intonation and to a more general and vague "accent" as the main reasons for their choices concerning the subjects' origins.

Going back to the study's research questions, we could try to answer that the Sicilian spoken by the community of Detroit does not really differ from the one spoken in Terrasini and Cinisi. In particular, Sicilian as spoken by the first generation, even by people who have been living in Detroit for forty or fifty years, is not distinguishable from the one spoken in their Sicilian hometowns. The Sicilian dialect used by second-generation speakers, on the other hand, starts presenting some elements of erosion and a higher presence of code-switching. These factors, however, are not equally present in all speakers, and in many cases the Sicilian used by second generations is still perceived as native-like by raters from Terrasini and Cinisi (57.48%).

In order to answer the second question about the perception of nativeness of the Sicilian immigrants living in Detroit area, it is important to look in detail at our data. The majority of the judges, both senior and junior, rated the speakers as coming from Terrasini or Cinisi (62.5% with regards to the first generation and 57.48% with regards to the second generation). Despite the

fact that the main data confirm that the Sicilian dialect is well maintained by the Detroit community, there are some signs that language erosion and/or contact with other Sicilian dialects spoken in the Detroit area are slowly changing the language. In fact, 25% of our judges<sup>3</sup> evaluated both first- and second-generation speakers as Sicilian but coming from a different area of the island (not from Terrasini or Cinisi), meaning that they could perceive some differences with respect to their own dialect.

Finally, as shown by the data, we can confirm our initial hypothesis that phonological factors represent the main elements that affect the judges' perception of the subject's language. Even though non-phonological elements, such as vocabulary and grammar, have also been taken into consideration by the judges for both tasks, the majority of the raters claimed that their judgments were mainly triggered by pronunciation and intonation patterns. In particular, Sicilian raters affirmed that the second-generation speakers that were reevaluated as non-native speakers were recognized by their "weird pronunciation of numbers" (Judge 14) and in particular of their vowels. In the same way, American judges claimed that their judgments were triggered by the pronunciation of vowels in words like "deer" (/diə/) and "sleep" (/sli:p/).

The data obtained, moreover, corroborate many of the theory presented in the literature review of this work. An important factor to be highlight is the effect of language usage on the speakers' performances (Flege et al., 1997). Many first-generation subjects, in fact, were not able to complete an entire interview in English even though they have been leaving the majority of their life in the United States (some have been living in Detroit for 40 years). These subjects claims that their knowledge of American Language is reduced to some elementary sentences, since they have been in contact mainly with Sicilians and thus their usage of English has always

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<sup>3</sup> These data are based on the average of the data presented in Table 4 and Table 5.

been very reduced, confirming that the amount of usage of the language not only affect the speakers' rate of foreign accent (p. 184), but it also affect their proficiency in the language.

In this part of the study, focus was placed on the perception of the subjects' Sicilian and English by native-speaker judges, and on the phonological factors that influenced their evaluations. To corroborate these findings, the next step of this research project, thus, might involve the employment of computer software analysis. That is, it would be interesting, in fact, to investigate in more detail the nature of the phonological features perceived by the judges in order to obtain a fuller picture in which the perception of native-speaker raters is integrated with more traditional linguistic analysis.

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## LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: ORAL QUESTIONNAIRE

The oral questionnaire was asked in Sicilian or Regional Italian. The Italian versions transcribed under each question are the actual questions used during the interview. However, in many cases the questions were asked in Sicilian<sup>4</sup>. The sentences added in brackets were asked in case the subjects showed confusion about the question.

1. When did you come to the USA (at what age)? Why? (Just for first-generation speakers)

IT: Quanti anni aveva quando è venuto/a negli Stati Uniti? Come mai si è trasferito (aveva già famiglia qui o ho venuto a cercare lavoro)?

2. What did/do you do in the USA?

IT: Che lavoro faceva/fa?

3. Where do you live in Detroit? Have you ever lived there?

IT: Dove vive a Detroit (? Ha sempre vissuto lì?)

4. How did you learn English?

IT: Come ha imparato l'inglese?

5. What is your highest degree obtained?

IT: Qual è il suo titolo di studio (è andato a scuola media/superiore)?

6. What is the language you speak better: Sicilian or Italian?

IT: Che lingua parla meglio: siciliano o italiano?

7. How often do you visit your hometown?

IT: Torna spesso a Terrasini/ Cinisi?

8. What language do you use most at home and with your friends?

IT: A casa o con gli amici parla in inglese, in italiano o in siciliano?

9. Have you ever studied any language apart from English?

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<sup>4</sup> Since the Sicilian dialect is not written, it is not possible to show here the actual Sicilian questions.

IT: Ha mai studiato una lingua straniera diversa dall'inglese (spagnolo, francese)?

10. What did you study at university? Have you ever thought of studying in Italy? – Have you ever thought of sending your children to study in Italy for high school or university?

IT: Che cosa ha studiato all'università? Ha mai pensato di studiare in Italia? / Ha mai pensato di mandare i suoi figli a studiare in Italia?

11. Please count 1 to 20.

IT: Per favore, può contare da 1 a 20?

12. Please tell the story *Frog where are you?* (once in Sicilian once in English).

IT: Adesso le mostro un libro di sole immagini, mi può raccontare cosa succede?

Optional questions.

1. Can you tell me about the *Festa di li Schietti* in Detroit?

IT: Mi può parlare della festa degli schietti a Detroit?

2. When is it celebrated?

IT: Quando viene celebrata?

4. What do you usually do?

IT: Che fate di solito?

5. Where do you usually celebrate it?

IT: Dove la celebrate di solito?

6. Where do you find all the necessary decorations and the tree?

IT: Dove trovate tutte le decorazioni necessarie per l'albero (ciancineddi e fuzziuetti)?

APPENDIX B: WRITTEN QUESTIONNAIRE

Samples of the written questionnaires:

Where are you from? \_\_\_\_\_

Age:

18 – 25

25 – 35

35 – 45

45 – 55

55 – 65

+ 65

**DCP1**

This person sounds pleasant and nice.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

This person sounds educated.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Where is this person from?

Northern America

Southern American

Another English speaking country

Second generation immigrant

From where?

Foreigner

From where?

Could you motivate your last answer?

Grammar used

Intonation

Rhythm of the speech  
(he is slow/fast)

Vocabulary

Pronunciation

Further details or examples: \_\_\_\_\_

**DCP2**

This person sounds pleasant and nice.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

This person sounds educated.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Where is this person from?

Northern America

Southern American

Another English speaking country

Second generation immigrant

From where?

Foreigner

From where?

Could you motivate your last answer?

Grammar used

Intonation

Rhythm of the speech  
(he is slow/fast)

Vocabulary

Pronunciation

Further details or examples: \_\_\_\_\_

Sei di Terrasini o Cinisi?

Età: 18 – 25

25 – 35

35 – 45

45 – 55

55 – 65

+ 65

**DCP1**

Pensi che questa persona sia simpatica?

Molto

Abbastanza

Poco

Per niente

Pensi che questa persona sia istruita?

Molto

Abbastanza

Poco

Per niente

Di dov'è questa persona?

Cinisi

Terrasini

Altro posto in  
Sicilia

Siciliano emigrato

Figlio/a di  
Siciliano  
all'estero

Dove? \_\_\_\_\_

Perché?

**CP**

Pensi che questa persona sia simpatica?

Molto

Abbastanza

Poco

Per niente

Pensi che questa persona sia istruita?

Molto

Abbastanza

Poco

Per niente

Di dov'è questa persona?

Cinisi

Terrasini

Altro posto in  
Sicilia

Siciliano emigrato

Figlio/a di  
Siciliano  
all'estero

Dove? \_\_\_\_\_

Perché?



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