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Immigration, integration and dialects: reflections on a recent Italian government advertising campaign¹

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Abstract

In late 2008 the Italian Ministry for Labour, Health and Social Policies launched an advertising campaign promoting the integration of immigrants. The campaign showed migrants from different countries singing songs and pronouncing characteristic phrases in various dialects. This is a surprising public manifestation of dialect, for two reasons. First the use of dialect as a usual form of daily communication in Italian society has been documented to be declining for some decades and second, although there is recent evidence that use of dialect may be experiencing a revival especially among young people, dialect use among *migrants* is not well documented. This article examines the evidence for a dialect revival and attempts a reading of the governmental publicity campaign in light of the functions that dialects are serving in contemporary Italy. It argues that the use of dialect in this campaign has a symbolic and ideological value, not necessarily connected to any real world patterns of language choice, and that the ideological references and appeals made in the campaign suggest that the target audience of the campaign is as much as the general Italian public as immigrants themselves.

Resurgence

There is much talk these days about a resurgence in the use of the dialects in Italy. Recent census figures suggest the dialects are holding their own. Italy has a rich body of information on language choice and use, deriving from large-scale surveys (for an overview and discussion, see Rubino

1 This article is based on a paper presented to the 5th Biennial Conference of the Australasian Centre for Italian Studies (ACIS), University of Auckland, 19-21 February 2009.

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2000; Berruto 2002; D'Agostino 2007). While, from a methodological point of view, such data suffer the limitations of all data that ultimately depend on self-assessment by informants, they do have the benefit of being based on samples of hundreds and sometimes thousands of persons and of having being replicated at close intervals. These surveys have been carried out by two organisations: Doxa, a market research and opinion institute, and ISTAT, the “Istituto Nazionale di Statistica”. The Doxa surveys were carried out in 1974, 1982, 1988, 1991 and 1996, while the ISTAT surveys were carried out in 1987-1988, 1995, 2000 and 2006.

These language surveys, which now cover a period of a quarter of a century, showed a gradual and apparently ineluctable increase in the use of Italian and a decline in the use of dialect. The exclusive use of dialect – those who claim never to use Italian in any regular way in any communicative situation – has dropped significantly and now stands at minimal levels (see Table 1). This situation of dialectal monolingualism can, according to D'Agostino (2007), be correlated with functional illiteracy, measured through the lack of any educational qualification.

Year	1974	1982	1988	2000	2006
	Doxa	Doxa	Doxa	Istat	Istat
% who use dialect even with strangers	29	23	14	7	5

Table 1. Exclusive dialect speakers (use of dialect with strangers) from language surveys 1974-2006.

However, in the last decade or so two things have become apparent. While it is true that the number of monolingual dialect speakers has shrunk to almost negligible dimensions, the number of monolingual Italian speakers has remained static or grown very slowly, depending on which survey you consult (see Table 2). I will here compare figures from the Istat surveys since in these surveys the various sampling parameters and the questions themselves have remained the same, allowing meaningful comparison.

Year	1987/88	1995	2000	2006
In the home	41.5	44.4	44.1	45.5
With friends	44.6	47.1	48.0	48.9
With strangers	64.1	71.4	72.7	72.8

Table 2. Use of “only or mostly Italian” 1987-2006 (Istat surveys)

Monolingualism – both Italian and dialect – seems to have reached a peak. In fact the overall figures for “habitual language use” during the twenty years of Istat surveys reveal a complex picture. Tables 3 and 4 reproduce figures given in the “Tavola 1” of Istat (2007) for language use in

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the domain with the highest rates of dialect use, the family, and the domain with the lowest rates, interactions with strangers. For convenience I have omitted the intermediate domain, interaction with friends. Both tables show that while the exclusive use of dialect is still dropping, exclusive use of Italian is now barely growing at all. However the habitual use of *both* Italian *and* dialect seems to be settling at around a third of all Italians within the family and a fifth with strangers. The total use of dialect – whether exclusively, mostly or together with Italian – counts for 48.5% of the population in the family domain and 24.4% in interactions with strangers. The use of “Other languages” is growing, at an accelerating rate, in both domains.

	In the family			
YEAR	Only or mostly Italian	Only or mostly dialect	Both Italian and dialect	Other language
1987/88	41.5	32.0	24.9	0.6
1995	44.4	23.8	28.3	1.5
2000	44.1	19.1	32.9	3.0
2006	45.5	16.0	32.5	5.1

Table 3. Language habitually used in the family by persons six years and above (Istat surveys)

	With strangers			
YEAR	Only or mostly Italian	Only or mostly dialect	Both Italian and dialect	Other language
1987/88	64.1	13.9	20.3	0.4
1995	71.4	6.9	18.5	0.8
2000	72.7	6.8	18.6	0.8
2006	72.8	5.4	19.0	1.5

Table 4. Language habitually used with strangers by persons six years and above (Istat surveys)

Another development that has come to light in recent surveys from different parts of the country is the recovery of dialect among youth and young adults, from teenage years to the mid-thirties. The latest two Istat surveys confirm the general trend that, among several pertinent variables, age is the primary predictor for language choice. In very general terms, as the age of the sample population increases, the exclusive use of Italian falls while the exclusive use of dialect and

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also the use of both Italian and dialect increases. However, the Istat surveys of 2000 and 2006 show that the 25-34 age group is a significant exception to this trend. One would expect this age group to use more Italian and less dialect than the next oldest age cohort in the surveys, the 35-44 year olds, but the opposite is true. According to both surveys 25-34 year olds use dialect, either exclusively or with Italian, more than those a decade older than them. This is particularly clear in the figures for the use of both Italian and dialect in the family and friends domains. What is more, this characteristic is becoming more marked. Use of both Italian and dialect by this age group actually increased from 2000 to 2006 (and their exclusive use of Italian and of dialect both decreased). This age group is choosing more and more to use Italian *and* a dialect in their daily interaction with their family (Figure 1) and with their friends (Figure 2).

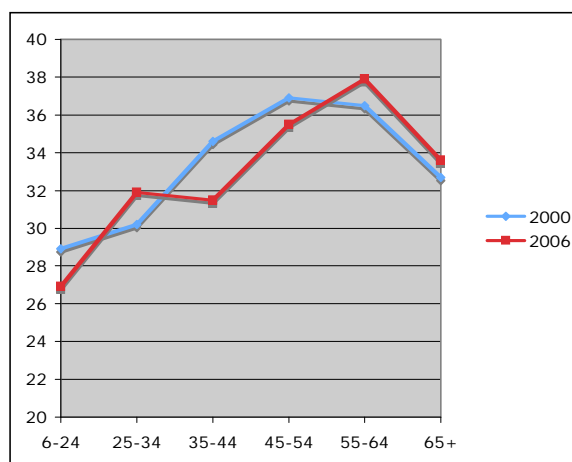


Figure 1. Use of both Italian and dialect in the family, by age group, 2000-2006 (Istat surveys)

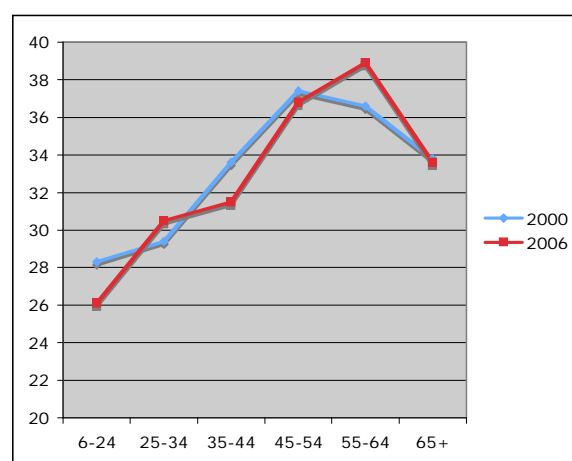


Figure 2. Use of both Italian and dialect with friends, by age group, 2000-2006 (Istat surveys)

D'Agostino (2007:178-179) analyses these data from a different perspective, and sheds a different light on the age factor. She follows two groups of respondents through the same three

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surveys being studied here: those born in 1985-1989 and those born in 1978-1982. In both cohorts, the number of those who claim exclusive use of Italian (only or mostly Italian) in the family drops from Istat survey to Istat survey. For both cohorts the period of time covered by the Istat surveys corresponds very roughly to their teens and early twenties. Thus, argues D'Agostino, for a part at least of the young generation, dialect may be recovered during adolescence or even later.

Another interesting trend to emerge from these two surveys is the role of gender in language choice, especially among the young. It has long been apparent that dialect use is more prevalent, or at least reported to be more prevalent, among men than among women (Marcato 1995), though the statistical differences have not been large. In the 2006 Istat survey the youngest age cohorts show a growing gap in language behaviour between the sexes, especially in the friendship domain. Among 6-24 year olds, 8.1% of boys report speaking exclusively dialect with their friends compared to 4.2% of girls. For the 25-34 year cohort, the figures are 9.6% for males and 5.0% for females. Similarly, among 6-24 year olds, 28.2% of boys report speaking both Italian and dialect with friends compared to 23.9% of girls. For the 25-34 year cohort the figures are 32.8% for males and 28.2% for females. The difference between the sexes decreases in older age groups.

The evidence is not overwhelmingly compelling, but there is reason to believe that the decline in dialect usage may be slowing. This is not to deny Francescato's claim (1986) that dialect is "dying and being transfigured", which is certainly a major element in the evolution of the Italian speech repertoire. Current data, however, seem to suggest also that young people, and especially young males, are choosing to recover use of dialect, most often in combination with Italian, in the domains of family and friends. The linguistic characteristics of this revived dialect may be different, sometimes significantly different, from the dialect of one or two generations ago, but it is used consciously and deliberately *as dialect*. How and why this happens is the subject of diverse interpretations.

Interpretations

In one sense, the revival or resurgence of dialect may be paradoxically a sign of the advancing Italianisation of the Italian population, since the recovery of dialect among the young is a sign of a growing confidence in their command of Italian: "ora che sappiamo parlare italiano, possiamo anche (ri)parlare dialetto" (Berruto 2002). Some evidence of the importance of linguistic (and cultural) self-confidence had already emerged in signs of dialect recovery among youth with higher levels of formal education (e.g. Lo Piparo 1990:79-81). It may also be a result of testing methods, i.e. a greater willingness to admit to use of dialect in a survey, though this in itself might be just another sign of the confidence factor. In any case, this confidence is more of a necessary condition for a revival than a sufficient one.

The resurgence of dialects is interpreted by psychologist Claudio Risé (2007) as a reaction against the destabilizing impersonality of the post-modern world. The renewed use of dialect has a Janus-faced nature: it is a means to recover something of the past with which to build a particular kind of future. Risé reads the resurgence of dialects in contemporary Italy as a recovery of tradition, the indispensable foundation of every educational process and progress.

The geographical specificity of dialects clearly makes them tools for the recovery or creation of a local, antinational identity in the face of the hegemonic developments of the modern world. But geographical variation is also used to express social or situational variation. Thus in Rome, dialects are being used by young people to mark a social low status, in opposition to mainstream values

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(Giovanardi 1993); in Naples on the other hand the fact that dialect has lost its negative values of social status makes it available for use among the young simply as an effective informal, familiar and spontaneous register (De Blasi and Montuori 2006). Many phenomena of dialect in youth music or street theatre fall into this category.

Another form of larger-level identity against which dialects are claimed to be a reaction is globalisation, and the instrument par excellence of globalisation, the Internet, is increasingly being used by those who work against the globalising trend. Dialects had been present in the Internet for some years in more traditional functions: sites dedicated to folklore and popular culture, literary and theatrical production, and the description of dialects, all of which had more to do with preservation of linguistic varieties than with their active use. Then dialect newspapers and other publications started going online and dialects assumed a more communicative role. But in the age of the global village or global city, we are seeing the use of dialect more and more to assert and create local identities. So-called “neighbourhood sites” and also politically motivated sites encourage the in-group use of a dialect or group of dialects (Fioriglio 2005).

It is significant that many of these new uses of dialect by young people do not presuppose a complete mastery of the dialect (D'Agostino 2007:185-186). Many young people who are now rediscovering a dialect and using it for new and creative purposes have had only a passive competence in dialect up to now, or have lived in dialect-speaking families who discouraged the use of dialect in the younger generation in order to encourage social mobility.

Similarly the growing use of dialect in public domains, like advertising, does not depend on full dialect competence in the audience. In the mid-1990s, the Findus group launched a series of frozen foods called “Piatti Uniti d’Italia” with ads that used images of persons of somewhat stereotypical physical appearance together with dialect phrases, which the agencies evidently expected a wide readership to be able to understand.



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Still in the 1990s, an advertising agency used a dialect phrase to promote itself: *cca nisciuno è affisso*. I remember seeing this poster on a wall in Milan, and on the same wall was another poster advertising a new mobile telephone model called "Plus", with the catchphrase *non plus ultra*. You do not have to be a fluent speaker or even reader of Latin to get the pun of the mobile phone poster, all you need is a rudimentary familiarity with school Latin or at least those Latin phrases found in



certain high registers of written Italian. Similarly, to get the Neapolitan joke, you do not have to be a competent speaker of a Central-Southern dialect or even to have a full passive competence. It is enough to have an average sensitivity and awareness of the major dialect groups of the country as, for example, they are encountered in film and television and perhaps literature. The increased use of dialect in advertising has in fact been interpreted as a sign of linguistic marginalisation, not vitality (cf. Nesi 2001).

From diglossia to dilalia

The destiny of the dialects in recent times is simply a playing out of the linguistic consequences of Unification. The unification of Italy and the adoption of a national language spelled the end of diglossia in Italy. Since the resolution of the Questione della Lingua in the 16th century, a diglossic

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differentiation of language functions had ensured the continued use of the dialects, throughout all social classes, while Italian began to spread as an alternative “High” variety to Latin. Once Italian began to spread as the national *spoken* language, however, it began to penetrate domains of use formerly reserved to the dialects. This happened slowly at first and, as we know, more rapidly in the second half of the last century. Diglossia gave way to a situation described by Ferguson (1959) as “standard-plus-dialects” and for which Berruto (1989) has coined the term “dilalia”. While the social hierarchy still obtains in general terms between the national language and the dialects, the crucial and defining elements of diglossia were incompatible with the adoption of a national (spoken) language. That is, Italian is now the language of primary s, a “first language” of many Italians and is therefore widely used in normal communicative situations at all levels of formality and informality.

This collapse of diglossia within the language ecology of united Italy deprived the dialects of the protection they had previously enjoyed and is the necessary condition for the gradual and, until recently, accelerating decline in dialect use.

The effects of emigration

Population movements of the last half century have hastened this process. The linguistic effects of emigration have been well documented since De Mauro (1963). Emigration, quite simply, led to a rise of Italianization and a drop in dialect use, usually through the acquisition of literacy (Bettoni 1993). The period leading up to the journey of emigration itself was often a moment of “anticipatory socialization” (Sobrero 1973), in which the need for literacy and for broader linguistic skills than one’s own local dialect was clearly grasped by the prospective migrants. Those who spent time working abroad discovered the importance of the written language as the only form of contact with family back home and in other places, and as a crucial social tool as they entered new worlds of bureaucracy and contracts and forms to be filled out. And those who remained behind, and whose only contact with their family overseas was by letter, often took concrete steps to acquire literacy (Reeder 1998), which of course happened through the medium of the national language.

The effects of immigration

The effects of the immigration of the last two decades on the national linguistic repertoire are only now being described. Already the new linguistic minorities probably have more speakers than the ‘historic’ minorities, if the estimated number of speakers of the historic minority languages is around 3,000,000, and the ISTAT survey of 2006 (see Table 3 above) claimed that five per cent of Italian residents, or roughly 3 million people, regularly spoke ‘another language’ in the home, that is, neither Italian or a dialect, nor one of the ‘historical minority languages’.

The 1999 law on the protection of the historical language minorities (law no.482 of 15 December 1999), which has been widely discussed by linguists (e.g. Dal Negro 2005), is an interesting piece of legislation to emerge from an Italy which was already receiving large numbers of immigrants. This law was the first piece of legislation of the Republic to proclaim that Italian is the “official language of the Republic” (article 1). It defined twelve “historic minority languages” which now became eligible for protection from the State. The Republic assumes the responsibility to protect “the language and culture of the Albanian, Catalan, Germanic, Greek, Slovenian and Croatian populations and of the populations which speak French, Franco-Provençal, Friulian, Ladin,

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Occitan and Sardinian” (article 2). Friulian, Ladin and Sardinian are conspicuous since they are the only three languages listed that historically exist entirely within modern Italian political boundaries and also because their status as “minority languages” rather than “dialects of Italy” is not equally clear for all three (cf. Harris and Vincent 1988). The law makes no reference to the dialects – in fact the word “dialect” does not occur in the text of the law – or to the new immigrant linguistic minorities.

The language repertoire of Italy is now immensely more complex than just a few decades ago. It is only 50 years since Pellegrini (1975) introduced the fundamental description of the repertoire in terms of four “keyboards” (*tastiere*), two dialect and two Italian. But the growth and recognition of intermediate varieties between the ideal poles of dialect and Italian, the complex fate of the dialects, the official support for the historical minority languages and the presence of the new minority languages – all this means that the dialects no longer exist in a simple opposition to the national language. They are now part of a much more complex, richer and less certain linguistic landscape. Against this new and rapidly evolving (socio-) linguistic context, we may now examine a recent official use of dialect.

2008 Ministry campaign

On 5 October 2008 the Ministero del Lavoro, della Salute e delle Politiche Sociali launched a campaign to promote the integration of immigrants, called “Progetto Integrazione”. The campaign included a tour by specialised personnel to meet immigrants in various cities, soccer tournaments with mixed teams of Italians and foreigners, and a publicity campaign. This campaign consisted of brief film clips for television, audio clips for radio and wall posters for display on billboards and in public places.

In the film clip, we see four immigrants, all at work and at the same time singing a popular song in the dialect of their adopted city. Aziz from Senegal lives in Milan and sings “Oh mia bela madunina” while he works on his earthmoving equipment; Patricia from the Philippines is a *badante* in Rome and sings “Fatece largo che passamo noi, le giovanotte de sta Roma bella” as she pushes her charge, in a wheelchair, through a park; Andrij from Ukraine mixes a cocktail in Palermo while singing “Sciuri sciuri”; and Wassef from Egypt is a *pizzaiolo* in Naples and sings “Iamme iamme ncoppa iamme ia” “as he tosses a pizza base expertly in the air.

In the audio pieces for radio, we hear two immigrants being instructed in how to speak certain phrases in the local dialect. Aziz,² from Senegal, is learning to say *mi sun chi per laurà* but shifts the accent on the Milanese verb *laurà* (*lavorare*) to the more usual penultimate syllable and in so doing turns the verb into a noun, a feminine proper name at that, *Laura*. No, insists his interlocutor, it is *laurà*, and with its correct oxytonic stress the word now rhymes with *legalità* and *felicità*. In the Neapolitan ad, Wassef is being taught the correct pronunciation of *nisciuno nasce mparato*. He is corrected by his Italian interlocutor for pronouncing *nisciuno* in an *Italianized* form, *nissuno*. When he masters that, the Italian speaker then suggests *Simm ‘e Napulë, paisà*.³

2 The official presentation of the campaign can be found at the following address: <http://www.lavoro.gov.it/Lavoro/md/Campagne/#integrazione> This site contains the video and audio segments as well as transcriptions of both, together with the posters.

3 In the transcript at least. In the audio file itself, the Italian speaker simply congratulates Wassef on learning the first sentence.

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The campaign included three wall posters, each showing one of the immigrants featured in the film. They are engaged in the same work as in the film. Certain personal details are given for each person: their first name, their country of origin expressed as a noun, their new Italian “identity” expressed an adjective relating to a city – *milanese, romano, napoletano, palermitano* – and the number of years that they have had their new identity. So: *Aziz, Senegal, Milanese da 5 anni*; *Patricia, Filippine, Romana da 2 anni*; *Wassef, Egitto, Napoletano da 3 anni*. The most prominent text in each image is a phrase in the dialect of the city they now live and work in: for Milan *Mi sun chi per laurà*, for Rome *Male nun fa’, paura nun ave’*, for Naples *Nisciuno nasce imparato*.



All three posters also contain the following paragraph of text: *Conoscere e rispettare le leggi italiane fa vivere meglio te e chi ti sta vicino. Vivere bene in Italia è un tuo diritto, ma dipende anche da te. Consulta il manuale d'integrazione su www.lavoro.gov.it*. The *manuale* (“Handbook for Integration”) is available in Italian and in seven other languages: Albanian, Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Spanish and Russian.



The campaign is explicitly addressed directly to the individual immigrant, and many verbs are in the second person singular, either imperatives encouraging integration through recognition of rights and duties, like the slogan of the campaign: *Scopri i tuoi diritti, apprendi i tuoi doveri*, or in the indicative on the same theme, such as the paragraph quoted in the previous paragraph. The paragraph is adapted somewhat in the case of Aziz, who is at the controls of earthmoving equipment; his poster alludes to the theme of work safety and the first sentences of the paragraph reads *Conoscere e rispettare le leggi sulla sicurezza protegge la tua vita e quella di chi ti sta vicino. Il lavoro è un tuo diritto, renderlo sicuro dipende anche da te.*



The campaign projects a definition of Italy in terms of its sub-national realities, differentiated in food, customs and dialect. Wassef has not been Italian for three years, but Neapolitan. This is a deeper form of integration and identification with one's country of arrival than the official affiliation "Italian" would denote. For one thing, it is the way Italians themselves construct and project their own identity. Here the immigrants are repeating native practice. If we were told only that Wassef had been Italian for three years, that could be taken to signify any one (or more) of a wide range of positions that a migrant might take with respect to their new country, in terms of the competing claims of, say, nationality and ethnicity. To be identified through reference to a regional reality in Italy is, it seems to me, far less ambiguous and more binding precisely because it is not an official designation but a historical and popular expression of belonging and identification.

But why dialect? It is not the case that immigrants of the last three decades have become fluent speakers of local dialects in large numbers. Dialects, like all language varieties, can be used for whatever social meanings and values their speakers wish them to carry, and there are reports of dialects being used, with respect to immigrants, for inclusion but also for exclusion (Amoruso and Scarpello 2005). It is, however, certainly the case that immigrants often acquire some degree of competence in dialect. Remember the comments above about recent official or public uses of dialect relying only on an imperfect competence. In this respect immigrants may be coming to manifest the same multiple linguistic competence as many non-immigrant Italians. Or perhaps the correct interpretation of these images is that now that dialects have lost much of their negative connotations and much of traditional associations with place and identity, they are available for very

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new uses, even use in government campaigns to promote integration. So does this usage suggest the dialects are alive and well and in a resurgence, or does their institutionalized use suggest they have lost much of their vitality, destined to survive only as substrates to an increasingly diverse national language?

Berruto (2006) has suggested four values that can be attributed to dialects in this new Italy. The top two values in terms of viability – a communicative value for everyday functional use, and an expressive value for humour – are signs of vitality and of full membership of the speech repertoire of the community. The bottom value is folkloristic and museographical: the dialect is used for the collection and conservation of materials and traditions: this is a sign of lack of vitality, in short of language death. In between these lies a symbolic and ideological value, whereby the dialects are used to refer to and represent certain worlds and sociocultural values. What this says about the vitality and future of the dialects is far less clear. It seems, however, that the ministerial campaign fits into this intermediate category, and it is most interesting in this respect to read Berruto's general comments (2006:119-120) on the "symbolic-ideological value" of dialect, which, he says:

is used not as a language variety which is semantically and pragmatically adequate to communicative needs, but rather as a vehicle for the evocation and activation of worlds of reference and particular values, which are different from those associated (or which are claimed to be associated) with Italian (sometimes, to be sure, even in tones of nostalgia and rivendication)⁴.

The symbolic-ideological force of dialect in this campaign is to evoke worlds and values intended to strike a chord more in the hearts of the native Italian population than among migrant workers. The information conveyed in the picture, the content of the Italian text and the very use of dialect, combine to produce a complex set of messages for multiple audiences. The biographical details given about each person combined with the other message of the image – that they are employed and happy – is evidently a powerful message to migrant workers in Italy, and a strong encouragement to integration. This message is also clearly speaking to native-born Italians as well. The campaign offers an image of the migrant worker that is positive and reassuring. The images reassure the Italian viewer that the Government is active in promoting integration of immigrants in law, employment and language. The immigrants portrayed have achieved linguistic integration at the level not just of Italian – they have successfully achieved legal residence and employment and, like all migrant workers, are assumed to be willing and able to read not just the campaign poster but the Ministry website in order to access the nearly two hundred page long *Manual* – they have integrated in the way that once characterized only the native-born, at the level of dialect.

The campaign seems to have received very little attention in the press, either in terms of simply reporting it or in critical comment. Italian governments do not traditionally make much use of public campaigns on matters of social policy and this campaign, though a notable exception to the tradition, appears to have gone substantially unnoticed. The "JOBtalk" blog on the site of the

4 [il valore che ho chiamato simbolico/ideologico del dialetto, che] si trova ad essere impiegato non in quanto costituisca una varietà di lingua referenzialmente e pragmaticamente adeguata a bisogni comunicativi, quanto come veicolo di evocazione e attivazione di mondi di riferimento e valori particolari, diversi da quelli associati (o che si vorrebbero associare) all'italiano (a volte, certamente, anche in chiave nostalgico-rivendicativa).

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financial daily *24 Ore* gives a balanced and overall negative assessment of the campaign.⁵ Responses to the campaign on private web blogs seem mostly to be predictable in repeating unimaginative ideological positions. So from one side of the ideological fence came accusations of racism and paternalistic assimilation with (predictable) references to the “bridging classes” proposed by Minister Gelmini for immigrant school children with language deficits, while from the other side came the claim that dialects, which are not widely spoken by immigrants anyway, should be left to Italians with (predictable) accusations of paternalistic glossing over of the problems caused by illegal (and legal) immigration.

The new sociolinguistic configurations rapidly evolving in contemporary Italy require new analyses. As the nature of Italian society changes, the linguistic codes that have been the carriers of particular sets of values, beliefs and traditions are now part of a new cultural and linguistic universe. The use of these codes in the multi-layered web of mass communications allows them to carry multiple meanings intended for multiple audiences.

5 <http://jobtalk.blog.ilsole24ore.com/jobtalk/2008/11/mi-sun-chi-per.html> [online, accessed 2 February 2009]

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