

ITALIAN LANGUAGE ATTRITION: A SYDNEY CASE STUDY

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1. INTRODUCTION

Italian-English bilingualism is extremely dynamic in Australia. Yet the dynamism of the situation is not shared equally by both languages. While English remains unchallenged as the dominant language of the country, and is therefore relatively stable, Italian alone, as one of many migrant languages (see Clyne 1982), has to bear the burden of rapid and conspicuous changes. Two main traits of Australian Italian stand out. They are interrelated: one is that Italian has ceased to be independently creative so that all its innovations have English as a source; and the other is that, as English takes over, Italian is gradually eroded. Studies on Australian Italian have so far concentrated on the first of these phenomena. A typology of English transference has been devised and to a certain extent transfers have also been quantified (Bettoni 1981). The second phenomenon is widely commented upon by the layman, fully recognised by linguists, but as yet little documented. It is the purpose of the present study to examine the ways in which Italian is eroding in the case of an Italian family living in Sydney.¹

Language attrition begins as soon as Italians leave Italy, so that if one were to test the language competence of first generation migrants after some time in Australia one would find some deficiencies vis-a-vis their competence at the time of migration. Interesting though this might be, there is here the complication of not having recorded their competence when they first arrived in Australia. For comparison one would have to rely on the current competence of their peers who remained in Italy, keeping in mind that only the latter would have participated in the normal evolution of Italian in Italy, which in recent times has been remarkably fast. This very reason, together with the fact that language loss among the first generation does not seem to be very conspicuous, makes the initial stage of attrition somewhat awkward to analyse. Moreover, there seems to be little urgency in giving it our attention. Even if it is clear that a seriously concerned effort towards Italian maintenance should start from the first generation where language erosion sets in, we do not yet envisage providing Italian courses for first generation migrants. On the other hand, there are at least three good reasons for beginning a study of language loss from that incurred by the second generation: firstly, their loss of language skills is quite conspicuous; secondly, it can be measured with reference to the language of their parents; and thirdly, most Australian Italians who enrol in maintenance courses belong to this second generation. Also of great

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interest is the final stage before language loss is complete. Here, however, only the fact that historically partial loss precedes total loss justifies giving attention to the intermediate stages first. Thus this study will analyse and compare the Italian language skills of parents and children in order to determine what and how much Italian has been lost between the generation dominant in Italian and that dominant in English.

2. METHODOLOGY

The Veneto family (as it will be called here) shares its history with many other Italian families in Australia. The father came to Australia as a highly skilled blue-collar worker 32 years ago from a small town in the province of Padua in the north-east of Italy. After a few months in the Bonegilla Camp, he settled in Sydney, worked very hard, and bought a home. A few years later he returned to Italy and brought back a wife from a nearby village. Thus Venetian dialect is regularly spoken in the Veneto home. Both parents have also an excellent command of colloquial Venetian Italian,² and a competent to moderate command of English. They are both of the opinion that their few years of primary schooling in Italy are equivalent to almost twice as many here in Australia.

... là era diferente / ... / insegnavano più di qua
perchè io ho fato là fino ala quinta / ma si faceva
di problemi si faceva di temi si studiava la storia
che qua studiano adeso sule skuole alti eh / e
s'imparava molto di più kuando andavamo a scuola
insoma. (Mother)³

Some feelings of nostalgia for Italy remain, especially because some older members of the family are still living there; but on the whole, after the hard initial period, they are happy here, have achieved economic security, and enjoy the company of other relatives and friends from the same village and region. Contacts with Italian relatives are maintained by regular correspondence, occasional telephone conversations and rare visits. Since migrating, the Veneto parents have gone back to Italy twice and have been visited here once by the father's parents.

There are four children in the family, all born in Sydney and still living at home: three boys of 20, 17 and 15 years of age, and one girl 12 years old.⁴ The two older children are working as bank clerks, while the younger two are still at school. Venetian dialect is their native mother tongue, but it is clearly no longer their dominant one. It remained dominant until the older brothers went to school, socialised with English-speaking peers and brought fluent English into the home. Thus the two oldest children remained dominant in the dialect longer than the youngest; and in the case of the girl, eight years younger than her oldest brother, it is doubtful whether she ever was dominant in Venetian at all. Their English is native-like and indistinguishable from that of their English monolingual peers. Italian is the language they are less familiar with, because in the mother's own words:

- *A casa che lingua parlate?*

eh un poco di tuto tuto mischiato / e un poco italiano
un poco ingleze un poco dialeto e / tuto mischiato
cozì // gnerebe parlare / l'italiano per far prendere
l'italiano ai figli / e loro ti rispondono in ingleze
e cozì...

- *Ma lo parlano abbastanza però l'italiano.*

eh non tanto sa non tanto lo parlano / biamo cercato di mandargli anche a scuola a Laika ma non han imparato proprio niente / masima a scrivere po niente niente.

We speak all mixed up, some Italian, some English, some dialect. We should speak Italian for the children to pick it up, but they answer back in English. They don't speak Italian well. We tried sending them to school, but they didn't learn anything; especially in writing, not a thing.

In fact, even if they have gone to some Italian classes on Saturday mornings, the results are regrettably scarce; for any practical purpose it can be assumed that in the case of three of the Veneto children (S20, S17 and D12) it is a question of natural language attrition, unchecked by any formal study of Italian. On the other hand, S(15) has been learning Italian as a school subject for four semesters, studying 'verbs, how to use the future and perfect tenses'.

The Veneto children normally speak only English among themselves and with their peers. However, they admit to socialising a lot with young people of Italian families, and sometimes also of other European countries. A few years ago they went to Italy with their parents, but their memories are rather vague. What attracts them there now is not so much the family or the family village, as the novelty of a different place, such as 'Venice amid the waters'. In any case they would not want to live there.

Only the mother listens regularly to Italian programmes on the ethnic radio in the mornings and evenings; the father does occasionally, the children never do. As for television, one son (S17) professes that zè tuto rabiscio (a transfer from 'rubbish'), and the father says that they show too much porcaria (a personal interpretation of porcheria, the Italian equivalent of 'rubbish'). There are some Italian newspapers in the home, both local and from Italy. The boys don't bother with them, the girl says she reads a magazzino de ragasi (children's magazine) called mesangero da ragasi.

All members of the Veneto family were interviewed individually in their home in April 1984 by a young Sicilian woman. She spoke her regional Italian, was very friendly and kept a casual conversational style which did not exclude spontaneous remarks on either side. However, there was no doubt that specific questions had to be asked and answered. The conversation was loosely structured around the following topics: family history and family life, attitudes to language use, a visit from Italian relatives, hobbies and favourite entertainments, memories of primary school and (after a particularly bad summer in Sydney) comments on the weather. All the Venetos actively co-operated and clearly gave their best performance. The tape-recorded interviews were then transcribed and analysed.

3. ANALYSIS

The main hypothesis underlying the following analysis is that, along a continuum of communicative modes which has at its two extremes the pragmatic mode on the one hand and the syntactic mode on the other, the children would be closer to the pragmatic extreme than their parents. Givón (1979:223) has summarised the structural properties of the two modes, and further shown how these are

similarly distributed in three contrastive pairs of human communication: Pidgin versus Creole, Child versus Adult, and Informal versus Formal language. If we consider that the Veneto children learned Italian under the dominance of English, that their native childish Italian scarcely developed after they started their schooling in English, and that it is used almost exclusively within the family domain, it seems reasonable to assume that their language will show some properties typical of Pidgin, Child and Informal language. This hypothesis is here verified by analysing some of the structural properties listed in Givon (1979: 223-231). Compared to their parents, the Veneto children's discourse will tend to:

1. Be delivered at a much slower rate, and involve more pauses and repetitions.
2. Involve a reduction and simplification of grammatical morphology.
3. Exhibit a great amount of internal variation and inconsistency.
4. Favour loose co-ordination over tight subordination.
5. Exhibit a much more prominent topic-comment structure as against a more prominent subject-predicate, and show more topicalised constructions.

3.1. Slow delivery and hesitation phenomena

There is no doubt that in terms of communicative performance in Italian (and/or dialect) both parents can be placed at the highest level among expert speakers on a nine-band interview-assessment scale compiled by Carroll (1980:135) along parameters such as size of the text produced, complexity, accuracy, appropriateness, etc. On the other hand, according to two competent teachers, the Veneto children were judged to belong to the mid bands 6-3 among good to extremely limited speakers, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1		
Band	Speakers	Informants
9	expert speaker	Veneto parents
8	very good non-native speaker	
7	good speaker	
6	competent speaker	
5	modest speaker	
4	marginal speaker	
3	extremely limited speaker	
2	intermittent speaker	
1/0	non-speaker	
		son 20
		son 17
		son 15 and daughter 12

The tabulation of the informants' and the interviewer's total word output shows immediately a clear difference in performance within the Veneto family. While father and mother provide answers which are on average about seven to four times longer than the questions they are asked, the two older son's average output is 2.5 times larger than the interviewer's and the two younger children's is about equal in size (see Table 2).

Informants	Informants' word output	Interviewer's word output	Ratio
father	3022	441	6.85
mother	2313	570	4.05
son 20	1424	581	2.45
son 17	1406	559	2.51
son 15	394	394	1.00
daughter 12	531	559	0.94

Of course, such differences in word output cannot be explained solely in terms of language loss. Too many other factors are at play here. For example, young people do not indulge in reminiscing about their past experiences as readily as adults, so that some of the conversation topics were, perhaps, less suited for them than for the parents. Moreover, the greater the age difference between the interviewer and the children, the shyer the latter might become. Unfamiliarity with the interlocutor can also inhibit children more than adults. Nevertheless, the differences cannot be disregarded, especially if considered together with other features, such as interview length (see Table 3).

Informants	Length of interview in minutes	Informants' word output	Word output per minute
father	21	3022	143
mother	18	2313	128
son 20	23	1424	62
son 17	18	1406	78
son 15	13	394	30
daughter 12	15	531	35

The length of the interview with individual informants varied from 23 minutes to 13 minutes. Tabulated with the word output it confirms that the children not only speak progressively less, but also progressively slower than their parents as their age decreases. In fact, even if without calculating the interviewer's question time and output the figures are rather rough, it is nevertheless clear that father and mother speak almost twice as fast as the older children and four times faster than the younger ones.

All sorts of hesitation phenomena slowed the children down during the interview. Some examples follow, approximately classified according to Blankenship and Kay (1964).

Silent pauses:

- (1) YEAH si spoza / in agosto / e dopo / si spoza qui. (S20)
- (2) ah[□] / sì in febbraio / FEBRUARY / ah[□] / so dato in piscina baso qua co amico / che abita baso qua / e zè / u[□] n FRIEND OF F / f famiglia / io mi ho ato baso piscina co lu. (S17)

Filled pauses:

- (3) ah mi lavoro su ah PERSONAL LOANS. (S20)
 (4) sì ah / i miei zii ah / mio nono e nona / cugine. (S15)

Non-phonemic lengthening of phonemes (drawls):

- (5) ah / iera / s EASY. (S15)
 (6) ho dato spiaggia in piscina / ho giocà / co miei fratelli amici. (S15)

Stutters:

- (7) oh i verbi ah come toperare i f fu ah / futuro PAST / pasato prosimo. (S15)
 (8) oh / ho fato / quattro sia m / sim / SEMESTERS e ogni seme- SEMESTER zè / è mez'ano. (S15)

Repeats:

- (9) oh più di un ano JUST LIKE THAT / YEAH più un ano. (S17)
 (10) ah e zè freddo inverno / ma zè neanche / REAL freddo zè neanche tanto tanto ma / SOMETIMES zè tanto freddo ma / zè ALRIGHT. (D12)

Omissions of parts of words:

- (11) i fratelli i sorè de me mama. (D12)
 (12) so ato baso là / YEAH BUT / TRé settimane s / e dop andato / a lavorà di nuovo. (S17)

Word change:

- (13) un amichi vuo ndare su NAVY / lavorà su NAVY. (S17)
 (14) sì / venesia / roma / ah / FLORENCE firenze. (D12)

Sentence corrections:

- (15) ah STEVEN / e zè / il / ah / ha vinti ani. (D12)

Sentence incompletions:

- (16) iera gente lì che / che / non iera interesse interesada / mparare italiano giusto... (S20)
 (17) - *Studiavate molto?*
 oh A BIT / oh / deso sì / ma... (S15)

As a normal and inevitable consequence of planning and execution difficulties during spontaneous speech production (Clark and Clark 1977:260-292), hesitation phenomena do not occur only in the children's interviews, but are to be found also in the parents' interviews. There are, however, significant differences. First, the children hesitate rarely using only one type of hesitation. For example, S(15) in (8) uses both filled and unfilled pauses, as well as drawls and stutters; and S(17) in (13), besides changing *ndare* with *lavorà*, repeats himself and omits parts of words. Secondly, the children hesitate at least twice as much as their parents. The figures in Table 4 are quite rough, and

Table 4

Informants	Word output	Unfilled pauses	Filled pauses	Drawls	Others	Total	Ratio
father	3022	291	5	54	97	447	6.7
mother	2313	142	23	109	68	342	6.7
son 20	1424	236	78	50	105	469	3.0
son 17	1406	289	39	13	67	408	3.4
son 15	394	92	51	27	22	192	2.0
daughter 12	531	91	48	19	24	182	2.9

serve merely as a conservative estimate. In fact, if length of pauses had been taken into account, and if repetitions, changes and corrections of words and word sequences had been excluded in the count of the total word output, the difference between parents and children would have further increased. Moreover, no calculations were made to relate the number of hesitations to the length of the answer sequences. As the parents have much longer sequences, many of their silent pauses would not be due to hesitations at all, but would be necessary breaks in the flow of speech.

Thirdly, parents and children hesitate for different reasons, or rather they hesitate for the same reasons, but to a different extent. According to Chafe (1980:170) the fundamental reason for hesitating is that speech production is an act of creation. Sometimes speakers hesitate while they are deciding *what* to talk about next, and sometimes they hesitate while they are deciding *how* to talk about what they have already chosen. The interviews of the Veneto family suggest that the children's enormous increase in hesitations is predominantly due to a more time consuming effort in verbalising something they already had in mind.

Of course all the Venetos hesitate while thinking about what to say. They do it, for example, in order to find and clarify an initial focus before embarking on an answer to a why-question. In this case hesitations typically occur at the very beginning and then between the phrases and clauses which express the foci of consciousness (Chafe 1980:178).

(18) - *Come mai avete deciso di restare?*

oh[□] sa prima un figlio dopo un altro[□] e veramente[□] la mia intensione era sempre quella di tornare in italia e dopo[□] cozi[□] eh[□] siamo rimasti qua insoma eco. (Mother)

There is no denying that children too hesitate in answering why-questions. Indeed for younger people these are sometimes quite difficult to answer:

(19) - *Sì perchè [ti piace di più la High School]?*

ah ah[□] / e zè / di più coze da fare / ah / pe[□] zè[□] di più FRIENDS che te fe / e zè e zè GOOD. (D12)

However, a high number of their hesitations occur within phrases and clauses, thus suggesting that the children encounter greater difficulty than their parents in coding certain concepts in a suitable way.

It is important at this point to notice how often the Veneto children hesitate before (or after) transferring from English. In (2), FEBRUARY occurs as a

repetition after a pause, and FRIEND OF F, itself an incomplete unit, is preceded by a drawl and followed by a pause, a stutter and repetition. In (3) PERSONAL LOANS follows a drawl and a filled pause; EASY in (5) follows a drawl, a pause and what looks like a stutter, and so on through to SEMESTER in (8), NAVY in (13), FLORENCE in (14), etc. Similar markers of transference from English can be found also in the parents' interviews, as well as in the speech of other first generation migrants (Kinder 1984). Yet both the fact that the children use many more transfers, and that these are almost all very conspicuous, phonically unintegrated code switches makes them hesitate much more. It seems then that in a semiformal conversation the children would rather avoid using code switches, but are forced to do so as a compensatory strategy aimed at solving problems due to insufficient linguistic resources (Faerch and Kasper 1983:46). While there is no doubt that in certain cases radical message adjustment strategies such as topic avoidance (Corder 1983:17) do cut the children's answer short, it is worthwhile noticing here that, once started, rarely are their messages left hanging. A positive achievement strategy such as a code switch, even if accompanied by a pause, a drawl or a repetition, is a more frequently used way of solving a problem than a negative reduction strategy which would leave the message incomplete. Indeed in a bilingual situation where both languages are understood, code switching is a more efficient way of coping. Often, it is the result of uncertainty or memory limitations due to performance, rather than permanent gaps in competence:

(20) - *E quanti anni hai?*

eh[□] // FIFTEEN

- *Scusa?*

DON'T KNOW HOW TO SAY IN ITALIAN / eh[□] quindici. (S15)

3.2. Reduction and simplification of morphology

Phenomena of deviant agreement between adjectives and nouns can occur for two quite different reasons; either because of lack (or a temporary collapse) of discourse planning, or because of gaps in the speaker's lexical and/or morphological competence (Sornicola 1981:57). The few examples of deviant agreement in the parents' interviews seem mainly due to the first reason. Lack of planning can affect even adjacent elements:

(21) ... e lui mi ha detto dice sai dice non c'è tanto possibilità
se vuoi andare per il belgio in miniera / se vuoi andare in
francia in miniera dice / sarebbe un'opportunità in Canada o
in australia dice no ma / non c'è tanta f / futuro dice
evero / ... (Father)

or elements further removed, as when the mother, having perhaps feminine words such as scarpe or calzature (*shoes*) in mind, makes *quele fate a scarpone* also deviantly agree with the masculine *dzocoli* (*logs*) mentioned earlier. Occasionally, hypercorrections might also occur, as in:

(22) qualche volta fano qualche[□] / coza di bela da vedere no. (Mother)
instead of qualche cosa di bello (*something nice*).

The parents' categorical (if sometimes deviant) marking of grammatical gender and number starts to exhibit some variation in the children's interviews. Also the children use deviant agreements sometimes as a result of a gap in their

lexical competence, as in questo estate and qualche volte, both in S(17), sometimes as a result of weak planning:

(23) ... vao a mie amici caza. (D12)

instead of miei amici (*I go to my friends' home*). Sometimes perhaps a hyper-correction is due to some floundering in connection with a syntactic transfer from English, which by the way is also used in (23):

(24) l'ostralia so che quanto d du ducento ani veci. (S20)

Here veci agrees with ani instead of with ostralia (*Australia only how much, two hundred year old*).

Quite often, however, although by no means consistently, the adjectives, especially in the predicate position, is not made to agree. For example, in the whole of S(20)'s interview, out of a total of 37 agreements, 24 are correctly made, five are deviant, and eight, six of which are predicates after a copula, are unmarked, because either an English transfer or an Italian adverb is used. Table 5 gives the figures for the other Veneto children, and shows how this weakening of the agreement increases as the children's age decreases, with the only exception of S(15), perhaps because he is learning Italian formally at school. Thus, for example, in S(17), la scuola and i maestri, as well as il lavoro are all bene; la HIGH SCHOOL, il TECH, and again i maestri are all VERY GOOD; il clima zè NICE, BALMAIN è QUIET, and mi so neanche CERTAIN. On the other hand,

(25) se ho / beo / cinema che fa su television el vardo.

If I have / good / film shown on television I watch it.

and BALMAIN again is referred to as bel paeze. In D(12) the weakening of the agreement is even clearer, as grammatical gender is reduced to semantic gender only. In fact, her six regular agreements are all made with nouns referring to people, such as compagni, amici/amica, parenti. Her only deviant agreement is a tuto used collectively to mean her father's relatives. All the others, referring to il tempo, il maestro, la scuola, etc. remain invariable, and are all predicates but one.

Table 5

Informants	Adjectives regularly agreed	Adjectives deviantly agreed	Invariable adjectives	Total no. of adjectives
S(20)	24	5	8	37
S(17)	30	6	14	50
S(15)	19	1	4	23
D(12)	6	1	7	14

Also of interest concerning the agreement is the regularity with which some children leave the past participle invariable when they delete the essere auxiliary in a compound tense. Consider, for example, the following excerpt, where S(20) is talking about a girlfriend:

- (26) YEAH si spoza ed è R / ritornaTHa da italia / ah^Γ andato fato
fato un giro co lui na trovare so parenti in italia ndato / tre
mesi credo che sia andato / esa / e^Γ / quano è ritornata / ah
diceva che / piaceva molto italia.

*Yeah she got married and / returned from Italy / went did did
a tour with him went to see his relatives in Italy went / three
months I think she went / she / and / when she returned / she
said that / she liked Italy a lot.*

With the only exception of *sia andato* where the agreement is not made despite the presence of the auxiliary, all other past participles are regularly made to agree when the auxiliary is present, but remain invariable when it is deleted. Unfortunately, it is not possible to check this pattern in S(17) and S(15) because during the interview they do not use a compound tense requiring *essere* and having either a female or a plural subject. With the youngest girl, however, the same pattern emerges again clearly:

- (27) - *Cos' hai fatto?*

*andato a^Γ mi MUM's frateLi ah / mi^Γ / mi so andata me cugine...
Went to my Mum's brothers' / I / I went my cousins...*

Time and space constraints do not allow us here to pursue the reduction of morphology further, relatively to the subject-verb agreement, or pronominal case marking, for example.

3.3. Internal variation and inconsistency

Before categorical loss occurs, the language of the Veneto family exhibits a lot of variation, both within the output of the same speaker and across the members of the family. The fact that the children, and especially the two younger S(15) and D(12), speak so much less than their parents does not allow us to illustrate this variation with many features. The forms of the copula and those of the verb *piacere* (*to like*) are here selected for analysis as they recur often enough in all the interviews.

Let us first consider the most common form of the copula, the third personal singular of the present indicative. Table 6 gives the occurrences during the interviews and shows how rapidly the Italian register is lost in the Veneto family.

Informants	è	iè	zè
father	29		1
mother	18		
S(20)	19	1	
S(17)	3	2	40
S(15)	2		2
D(12)			15

In the eldest son *è* is still quite strong with 19 occurrences, and he uses only one dialectal form, in any case this being a weakened form of the dialect closer to Italian. S(17) strongly favours the dialect copula, but still retains both the Italian and the weaker dialect forms. S(15) despite his formal learning of Italian, uses Italian and dialect forms in equal numbers. Finally, D(12) only uses the strong dialect form.

Table 7 gives the occurrences of the Italian, dialect and intermediate forms of the third person plural of the imperfect tense, and Table 8 gives those of the whole verb *essere*. Together with Table 6, they confirm that during the process of language attrition, between the parents' phase which diglossically distinguishes between Italian and dialect, and the youngest child's phase which knows only the dialect, there is an intermediate stage in which the children are unable to distinguish between Italian and dialect forms. They therefore use them both, seemingly at random.

Informants	erano	era	ierano	iera	gera
father	1	2			
mother	1	1			
S(20)				1	
S(17)					4
S(15)					
D(12)				1	

Informants	Italian forms of the copula	Weak dialect forms	Strong dialect forms	Total
father	119	1	1	121
mother	68	2		70
S(20)	32	15		47
S(17)	14	6	49	68
S(15)	8	1	4	13
D(12)	1		32	33

The verb *piacere* is also commonly used during the interviews. It is also difficult enough for the children to master and show a lot of variation. As expected from expert speakers, father and mother use it regularly in its Italian forms, whether the subject precedes:

(28) *il clima qua mi piace.* (Father)

or follows:

(29) *di principio qua non mi piaceva restare in Australia.* (Mother)

If we limit ourselves to consider only the most common occurrences of the verb *piacere*, that is those expressing the likes and dislikes of the speakers, then the children seem to alternate between Italian and dialect forms on the one hand, and between the orthodox use of indirect personal pronoun followed by the verb agreeing with its grammatical subject and a regularised use of the verb agreeing with the personal pronoun as the subject:

(30) - È meglio lavorare?

YEAH me piazò / mi vo a SYDNEY TECH / mi studia note / mi piazò
kozita studiare note e lavoro / giorno / il giorno zè lungo
però mi piazò / e zè / NEW FRIENDS amiki mi ho fato / ah^Γ su
TECH / e zè VERY GOOD / me piazò Tanto. (S17)

Sometimes the personal pronoun is left out altogether, whether the verb is supposed to agree with it or not,

(31) - E l'inverno ti piace qua l'inverno?

OH YEAH / YEAH / basta che / oh no piove nu piace mia il
tempo che / che tanto piogia / zè pioge / no no non piaccio
però. (S20)

whether it is dialect of Italian:

(32) - Perché ti piacerebbe andare?

oh^Γ / tanti ah / bei paezi / le gonde entro venetsia piaccio /
piazò venetsia pechè è sopra l'aqua / e roma e^Γ / tuta. (S15)

While io piaccio in

(33) - Senti, cosa ne pensi del clima qui a Sydney, ti piace?

ah^Γ / q questo ano? / io io piaccio sì. (S20)

leaves no doubt as to the agreement between the personal pronoun and the verb, some confusion in the children's mind might be due to the fact that *mi* can either be the Italian indirect pronoun, or the dialect subject pronoun, as in *mi no capiso* (*I don't understand*).

So far only variation within the verbal system and between Italian and Venetian dialect has been mentioned, but other variation is quite obvious. For example, most transfers from English alternate with the Italian they replace. In (30) English and Italian dentals alternate. The two English syntactic structures in (23), (24) and (27) are by no means regularly used. At the lexical level, *febraio* and *February* in (2), and *Florence* and *Firenze* in (14) alternate within the same utterance. There is more variation within the Italian itself. *Amici* alternates with *amichi* as the plural form of *amico* (*friend*). *Miei*, the masculine plural of the possessive adjective, becomes either *me*, *mi* or *mie* respectively in *me fratelli* (*my brothers*), *mi noni* (*my grandparents*) and *mie amichi* (*my friends*), all of which appear in S(20). The same verb can be conjugated with either auxiliary as in *so ndato* and *ho andato* (*I have gone*), both in S(17); and so on.

3.4. Lack of subordination

Table 9 confirms the hypothesis that, at least during the interviews, the Veneto children favour looser co-ordination and avoid subordination between clauses and sentences. Moreover, the few subordinate clauses they do use are limited to

Table 9								
Informants	Loose sentences		Co-ordinate sentences		Subordinate sentences		Total	
father	141	37%	121	32%	119	31%	381	100%
mother	87	29%	145	48%	70	23%	302	100%
S(20)	74	46%	51	32%	35	22%	160	100%
S(17)	110	58%	56	29%	23	12%	189	100%
S(15)	26	65%	10	25%	4	10%	40	100%
D(12)	24	39%	34	55%	4	6%	62	100%

temporal clauses, introduced by *quando*, causal clauses with *perchè*, and relative clauses invariably with *che* as a pronoun. However, the occurrences thus calculated might not do justice to the children's skills. In fact, their texts are much shorter and frequently broken up by the interviewer's questions. They thus inevitably display a smaller variety of features than those of their parents. On the other hand, until further research will clarify the issue, it is also possible to doubt whether their short answers, numerous hesitations, frequent transfers from English, variations and uncertainties about morphology displayed during the interviews might not be indication enough that the children are unable to cope with the linguistic sophistication and longer term planning required by tight subordination.

3.5. Prominence of topic-comment structure

The semiformal question-answer format of the interviews does not allow for a display of the full range of conversation structures. However, something can be said about the prominence of the topic-comment structure in the opening of the answer sequences. In the interviews three basic ways of starting off an answer have been noticed. First, the topic of the question is deleted in the answer and only the comment is given:

- (34) - *E quanti anni ha?*
Cinquantasei. (Father)
- (35) - *Dove lavori?*
ah[□] OXFORD STREET in città. (S20)
- (36) - *Ti piace di più la high school o la primary?*
HIGH SCHOOL. (D12)
- (37) - *Sono più grandi di te?*
YEAH. (S15)

In these cases, whether the question is a *wh*- question, a disjunctive or a polar question, the new information of the comment depends totally on the co-text for interpretation. Despite the fact that this deletion of the topic is most common, Table 10 shows that only the two younger children use this structure more often than other ones.

Informants	No topicalisation		Comment topic		Topic comment		Total
father	16	28%	21	36%	21	36%	58
mother	21	33%	24	38%	18	28%	64
S(20)	43	45%	33	35%	19	20%	96
S(17)	41	38%	37	34%	29	27%	107
S(15)	53	79%	12	18%	2	3%	67
D(12)	66	77%	14	16%	6	7%	86

Secondly, the topic is expressed in the answer, but following the comment, often as an afterthought:

- (38) - *Senta cosa gliene sembra del clima qui?*
non poso mica lamentarci come clima qui... (Father)
- (39) - *Tu eri il più bravo della scuola?*
oh[^] no io non iera il più bravo... (S20)
- (40) - *E prima cosa facevi?*
oh[^] / steso JOB / mi fazevo SAME THING... (S17)

As can be seen from these three excerpts this type of postponed topicalisation does not add any information to the autonomous content of the preceding comment. Its main function here seems to be that of slowing down the communicative progression, even if sometimes the topic repeated at the end of the answer sequence could be seen as the conclusive element of an argumentative sequence, after a *propositio* (i.e. the topic expressed in the question), and a *ratio* (i.e. the comment expressed in the answer), as in (18) further above. However, it is also possible that in the course of making the topic clear some new information is added:

- (41) - *Siete andati tutta la famiglia?*
YEAH YEAH / tuti YEAH pe tre mesi sono andato / tuto
YOU KNOW. (S20)

Despite the added information in (41), it remains nevertheless clear that the topic which follows the comment constitutes here a delaying device. This is not necessarily so, as one could imagine a reinstatement of the topic for emphatic purposes, but the intonation here denies this possibility. This type of postponed topicalisation is remarkably common. It is used in just over a third of the parents' and older children's answers, with the only difference that the parents seem to add more information than the children after the reinstated topic.

Finally, the topic imposed by the interviewer is taken up by the informants, using one or more elements in her question sequence:

- (42) - *Senta e lei in Italia ha fatto la scuola elementare?*
l'ho fate fino a sesta. (Father)

- (43) - *E quanti anni hai?*
 ne ho venti. (S20)
- (44) - *Senti, e la scuola elementare dove l'hai fatta?*
 la?
 - *elementare, vuol dire primary.*
 PRIMARY ah[□] / SAINT AUGUSTINE'S. (S17)
- (45) - *Facevate un poco di sport?*
 ah[□] un poco di sport / non troppo. (D12)
- (46) - *Cos'è che fai?*
 mi? / ah giusto servire i CUSTOMERS. (S17)

As can be seen from Table 10, with the exception of the two younger children, this reinstatement of the topic before providing the answering information in the comment is quite common, although it is not as common with the rest of the family as is the postponed topicalisation. Most of the time, as in (42) and (43), the parents and to a certain extent also the eldest child, repeat elements of the question in an elaborate way and syntagmatically integrate them in their answer sequences. On the other hand, the other children leave the repeated topical element hanging, as in (44), (45) and (46); then the comment follows grammatically unrelated, often after a pause, sometimes with an interrogative intonation. Again, as with the postponed topicalisation, it seems that these answer structures can be accounted for in terms of a delay in linguistic production, especially in the examples (44)-(46).

To conclude, three more observations need to be made. First, the topic deletion in the answers of the two younger children can well be explained with their greater reluctance to speak and to provide elaborate answers. In any case, it seems that their delaying devices, i.e. their hesitations, are of the simpler kind shown in 3.1.

Secondly, the type of topicalisation in (44)-(46) which occurs in a sequence without a verb clearly points to the younger children's preference for a topic-comment structure rather than a subject-predicate. Two beautiful examples of topic-comment structure in a sentence without a finite verb occur in S(17), perhaps the most self-confident of all the Veneto children:

- (47) - *Cos'è che fai?*
 mi? / ah giusto servire i CUSTOMERS / i CUSTOMERS / coza vuoi far coza / [inaudible].
 - *Come scusa?*
 oh quando s[□] servivo CUSTOMERS eh / THAT'S IT/ oh no come / come un TELLER / coi soldi nie niente cozita giusto / coze che vuoi savere per la banca e / mi giusto ANSWER QUESTIONS cozita.
- (48) - *Senti com'è stato il tempo quest'estate?*
 Teribile / il Temp gera / Teribile / e zè sempre fredo e / e soe mai visto fuora / THAT'S IT.

Duranti and Ochs (1979) have convincingly argued that in Italian conversation left dislocations, such as *coi soldi* in (47) and *e soe (il sole)* in (48), compared to the left location of the subjects, are potentially competitive actions and that they occur mainly in connection with turn-taking and with maintaining the floor. As during the interviews there was little competition from the interviewer, this might explain their limited occurrences, and hence the fact that we are unable to quote meaningful figures.

Thirdly, the frequent, and one can say from the point of view of informational content, useless reinstatement of the topic by the Veneto family must not be seen as a separate phenomenon from what have been called repeats in 3.1. Together with the repeats and other hesitation phenomena on the one hand, and together with nominal structures such as those occurring in (44)-(46) on the other, they clearly point to difficulties in the children's planning of their speech. These difficulties seem to increase in the children as their ages decrease, until they reach a point when even repeats are no longer helpful, and only pauses and drawls, as well as frugality with words, or, in the extreme case, silence, can overcome them.

4. CONCLUSION

Even this brief survey of selected features of the Veneto interviews confirms our initial hypothesis, that the children's language erodes in the direction of a pragmatic mode, philogenetically (in terms of the history of various languages) and ontogenetically (in terms of language development from child to adult) anterior to a syntactic mode. To the extent that the analysed features of this pragmatic mode are also characteristic of the informal unplanned spoken discourse in general, and of the less educated lower socioeconomic classes in particular (cf. Sornicola 1981) they are shared also with the parents. It is, therefore, not so much a question of discrete features categorically lost in the children's texts, as a continuum which presents degrees of variability.

From the data, it seems clear that, in descending age order, the children speak less, slower and more hesitantly than their parents. There are indications that regarding the adjective agreement their morphology is weakening gradually as their age decreases. Internal variation and inconsistency at the phonic, morphological, syntactic and lexical levels are quite obvious, especially regarding alternation of dialect and English forms with Italian ones. The frequency of subordinate sentences, as against loose and co-ordinate sentences, decreases regularly with the age of the children. Furthermore, the few subordinate clauses in the younger children are limited in range and never subordinate to subordinate clauses. Finally, although no conclusive evidence of a more prominent topic-comment structure can be put forward here, there is no indication that points in the opposite direction. The common presence of the topic in the answer sequences, preceding or following the comment providing new information, suggests that yet another delaying mechanism is at play here.

Of course, before drawing firmer conclusions more linguistic features would have to be taken into account, more interviews of members of different families would have to be analysed, and where possible diagnostic feed-back oriented tests would have to be devised. On the other hand, a preliminary reading of interview transcripts of some 12 more families, both Venetian and Sicilian, suggests that the Veneto family is representative of linguistic trends in the Italian community.

Finally, what so far, in terms of the wider Italian community in Australia, has been called language erosion, should, in terms of the personal histories of the Veneto children, be qualified as a failure to acquire (Andersen 1982:85). Their childish, informal pragmatic mode never had the chance to develop into a more elaborate syntactic mode. Italian is for them an oral tool only, used almost exclusively in the family context dealing with obvious topics and simple tasks, involving face-to-face communication within a small group of intimates who share much of the pragmatic presuppositions about their universe and its social and motivational structure (Givón 1979:231). As the Veneto children grew up, the transition from a more pragmatic to a more syntactic mode was not achieved within the same mother tongue, but across languages. School English and peer-group English gradually replaced Italian where this childish and informal language became inadequate. If Australia is interested in language maintenance, the task it faces would be that of giving the children of migrant families a chance to develop their mother tongue to a level adequate for adult use, before even this poorer language is totally lost. As can be seen from the interview excerpts given above, the base on which to build is still quite strong.

NOTES

1. Research for this paper was funded by a 1984 Special Project Grant from the University of Sydney. I would like to thank Antonia Rubino for her invaluable assistance in recording and transcribing the interviews, and for her intelligent comments.
2. A variety of the national language marked both socially (lower socioeconomic classes) and geographically (the Veneto region in north-eastern Italy).
3. As far as possible normal Italian and English spelling has been used. However, English sounds occurring in Italian or Venetian words, and English words, when all pronounced with English sounds, have been capitalised. Moreover, as /s/ and /z/ have a slightly different distribution in Venetian dialect, and as /ts/ and /dz/ are quite rare in Venetian Italian and unknown in Venetian dialect, 's' and 'z' have been used for /s/ and /z/. Where necessary, 'ts' and 'dz' substitute the normal spelling.
4. They will be called here S20, S17, S15 and D12 respectively.

