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“Buona Domenica” (1980–1995). The Linguistic Phenomena in the letters of Italians in Luxembourg and the Great Region

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Abstract

The present article is on the linguistic characteristics of a corpus of letters sent to the television broadcast *Buona Domenica*, transmitted between 1980 and 1995 by RTL Luxembourg. This corpus contains 600 letters sent to the editorial staff by Italians or other nationalities interested in the Italian language and culture, residing in Luxembourg or in the neighbouring countries: Belgium, France and Germany (the Great Region). The vivacity and spontaneity of these letters presents us a period of time that precedes the globalization of the mass media and is not so far from our present time. Each letter chosen for this article highlights especially the relationship that bound emigrants to the autochthonous language and to the memory of their mother tongue, almost always a dialect.

Keywords

Buona Domenica, linguistic characteristics, Italian language and culture.

“*Buona Domenica*” was a television show broadcast by RTL (Radio Télévision Luxembourg) from 1980 to 1995. The show would be broadcast every Sunday around noon for about an hour. It addressed an Italian audience using exclusively the Italian language and was transmitted on the territory of Luxembourg and the surrounding areas of France, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands.

The transmission aimed both at providing information for and dialogue with fellow expatriates by means of cultural, tourism and sports

reportage and also offering practical information related, for example, to calculating the years of pension or dealing with all kinds of paperwork between Luxembourg (or the neighbouring territories) and Italy. Those were the years before the Internet and satellite television, and for most Italians “Buona Domenica” was the only chance to listen to their language and to hear or see something of their country of origin. It is therefore easy to imagine the great success of the show, which quickly assumed the function of a communication channel between the Italians and the national and local institutions. The relationship between the show and its home audience became closer after RTL took the decision to advertise the initiatives and events organized by various associations of Italians in different territories.¹ Thus increased the already numerous letters that many Italians would send each week to the editorial staff of “Buona Domenica,” asking to view again a particular reportage on Italy or a popular singer or a sporting event or describing a personal situation (perhaps with a case blocked by bureaucracy), but also to inform on events organised by associations, asking for the news to be presented on television. Of all the letters, more than six hundred have been saved. This corpus of letters keeps alive the freshness of a relationship between a TV show and the public, which can hardly be imagined today, when almost every exchange of letters has been replaced by electronic mail or Facebook. Most of the letters preserved date from the first early years of the show, probably due to a non-systematic storage over the years, faced with an increasing number of letters sent to the editor.

As far as the geographical distribution of the letters sent to “Buona Domenica” is concerned, the following distribution is observed:

Luxembourg	230
Germany	17
France	120
Belgium	245

The lack of familiarity of most of the letter senders with the instrument of writing is quite obvious. There is a direct derivation of the written from the spoken one, often informed by clear French influences. The following excerpt from a letter, which illustrates a large portion of the

requests sent during the show for listening to certain bands, contains some interesting linguistic phenomena:

I have seen many times your Sunday show and the others and they have a common feature, for instance in those of 89 and 90 you always invite the Sicilian groups more than the Sardinian groups, the Sicilian groups sing well and present well, too, the Sardinian groups sing well and present well. I understand that the Sicilians are more than the Sardinians, is the number of the inhabitants more important? I understand that there are more requests from Sicilians than from Sardinians. For information on festivals or manifestations, positions or other problems, the presentation is well done by Andea or Rocco, there is no difference here, the presentation is equal, generally I don't see any difference ... (Monceau, 10/04/90)

Obvious oral French constructions are for instance "comprendre" instead of "comprendo," "egole" instead of "uguale," "del domenica" visibly used in the masculine, while strictly graphic French idioms are those such as "que" instead of "che," "presentatione," "des" and not "dei," "est" instead of "è."

Several other letters, however, complain about the decision of the RTL channel to shift the Italian show to 11:00 pm on Sunday:

We have always watched your Buona Domenica show and me and all my family and several other compatriots resident here at Marcinelle were great fans, and not only here, but almost from everywhere in Belgium, we watched it and we appreciated it very much even if it lasts only for one hour; but we were glad anyway, we were informed on so many things, it had a little bit of everything, it was like we were among you and other Italian people, families, young people, elder people, children, we could learn so many things, now the show is moved to 11 at night, certainly, it is not your fault, we understand. At 11 at night? We, old people, are asleep at this hour. (Seraing, 12/5/87)

The text contains graphically Frenchified terms connected to the orality of words such as "me" for "ma" and "sur" for "su," besides the frequent use of the word "emissione" instead of "trasmissione."

The war stories are often very moving as well:

I am an old emigrant. I am a survivor of Ambalays, one of a very unfortunate class, as many other classes that have dealt with so many wars ... The war began in the 40s. I was called back to arms together with 129 people of the infantry. Now I have finished my whole career ... At the same time, I would like to send a warm greeting to all those from Abisinia. I would also like to greet you and congratulate you for your show and all broadcasters, men and women, of Tele Luxembourg. (Rombas 28/11/1983)

In addition to some dialectal words, what strikes in this letter is the word "spichérine" from the English word "speakers," but used in French as feminine "speakerine" meant to describe "the person in charge with presenting programs on television." Here, the writer gives the French version of the word in its almost phonetic transcription.

Another letter informs "Buona Domenica" on a tourism/cultural exchange between the residents of Villacidro (Sardinian town) and Stiring-Wendel, a small French town on the border with Germany, but reported by the writer in the form of "Stirino."

People from Villacidro will come to Stirino for a festival on the 17th and 18th of June and we, the French, will go to Villacidro in the first week of August for the holiday of St. Sisinnio, which lasts for three days, but a day and a night will be a country fair. That is because the church of the Saint is located in the countryside. I was also wondering if there might be someone there interested in spending a few days in Sardinia to film a bit of this event for your show. (Stiring Wendel 19/2/83)

For announcing another folk event, the following letter presents an interesting "majorettes" Italianized in "maggiorrette":

During the first week of February I sent you a letter telling you that on the 26th and 27th of June 1982 there will be a great night party at Varallo – Pombia, Novarra district, my native region, to which the Municipality invites the majorettes of Thionville under the star of friendship and where there will be cultural, folklore and culinary delights, so please let me know if you're interested to make a coverage for your Buona domenica show I would be grateful if you could answer to this invitation of mine and I renew the invitation for you to come to my house if the weather is fine, I would

really enjoy a cup of coffee in your company. I will be waiting for your response. Greetings! (Volstroff 15/2/1982)

A frequent request concerns the revival of good old Italian films, which the RTL network could "politely" broadcast:

Dear Mr Editor of Buona Domenica. I dear ask you to kindly ask the Director in charge of the programs in Luxembourg if he would be so kind to broadcast some good Italian or French films such as Fernando Borvil Luiso Mariano Tino Rossi. Partirono le rondine or Ugo Tognazzi Alberto Sordi Giulietta Mazzini Raffae Vallone Amedeo Nazzari Gina Lolobricida Sofia Lorena etc. etc. and many, many good Italian and French films.

Thank you in advance because I only have the TV left to entertain me a bit since my wife died 4 months ago it is only this way that I can have a little distraction I apologize for the mistakes made I only went to school for two years thank you very much

Sincerely yours

Greetings

Mont St. Marten 30/1/1982

Frequently, the letters also ask for help in solving old cases, such as the following that goes back to the time of military service in Italy:

Now, I would like your organization to put itself in my shoes, that is: during my military service I had an injury at work and it is now for many years that the Court of Auditors in Rome, where my file is, makes me go here and there, to various Italian consulates. Now I do not know where I should go; moreover, Rome does not respond, the consulates seem not to care. I don't think it is correct for this file to sleep for so many years at the Court of Auditors in Rome; I have the information desired from Rome and the Consulate in Nancy and Metz. Now I would like to know if someone could do something about my situation. I believe and hope that your organization could solve my situation.

All my greetings to the entire team of Buona Domenica and I wish you a happy new year,

Sincerely yours,

Mont St. Martin, January 1st, 1981

The joy of listening to the Italian language compared to the fatigue of listening to French everyday is effectively expressed by a passage of the following letter:

... it has been twenty-four years since I moved to France, I am tired of hearing French all the time.

Congratulations to all staff members of Buona Domenica and I hope the show will last because I really enjoy hearing my mother tongue

Fameck, June 16th, 1980

The author of the following letter asks instead of a "reportaggio" (the Italianized form of the French "reportage"), which apparently had been broadcast before, on his home region, Friuli, and in particular on Gemona:

I would like (obviously, if possible) to see again in a small filmed reportage my dear Friuli and more particularly my town - GEMONA ...

Anyway I hope that my letter will reach its purpose and I thank you in advance. Please accept my most cordial and respectful greetings

Maizieres les Metz, May 10th, 1980

The joy expressed in this letter combines with a veiled regret for the too long time gone without "Buona Domenica":

Obviously I am talking about your show Buona Domenica, which I think we all Italian emigrants have expected anxiously. On the contrary, you should have thought of putting it a little bit earlier. But it's never too late. I love it, so I will continue to watch it every Sunday.

METZ, March 8th, 1980

The idea of "abandonment" by Italy is related to the remembrance of the war years and sufferings:

Italy forgot us.

The American soldier made a hole in my ribs and when I was down he hit me with the rifle in the head and caused a large injury there

Greetings

Amnéville, December 28th, 1980

We will end this catalogue of letters with a little longer piece of correspondence from a young viewer residing in Luxembourg. Both for its form, entirely free of errors, and for the nature of the request, it seems entirely representative for the level and type of letters sent from the Grand Duchy:

Dear friends SANTINI and MORMINO,

We would like to express our appreciation for Mr. Navadic and Pauly, as well as to the technical staff and collaborators, for the production of BUONA DOMENICA.

We write to you only now, because, before expressing an opinion, we wanted to watch several shows, knowing that such an initiative requires difficult sacrifices and efforts, the more meritorious when lacking financial resources. It's only fair that we applaud the more what has been achieved, in an ever more interesting crescendo, one Sunday after another.

We are a group of young employees, technicians and simple workers, and we use to get together weekly to discuss on various issues, especially cultural ones.

Among these problems, mass media is the one we are passionate about and often returns to the table. Inevitable, then, the comparison between the situation of young people here "on the spot" (of all young people, from Luxembourg and immigrants) and of the Italians. On the occasion of the annual leave, which we spend in our towns in Italy, we see that the youth of our mother country participates actively in all areas of information (radio, television, press). This comparison, of course, reveals that the Italian youth is more fortunate than us.

We understand very well that one should know how to wait with patience and intelligence and that the most lasting achievements are those that take place gradually, by means of democratic discussion. That is why, again, we applaud the fact that you wanted to start a debate on young people by questioning them themselves.

We hope that, as long as money allows it, there would be room not only for political news, sports, folklore and songs, but also for issues of cultural relevance.

Sincerely yours:

Luxembourg, 13.06.1980

In fact, the overwhelming part of the letters sent to the editor of "Buona Domenica" from the Grand Duchy comes from associations

and consular or embassy offices and only minimally from private persons: this is exactly the opposite of what occurs in the neighbouring countries. The reason is found in the varying levels of social and cultural integration of Italians in Luxembourg. The first great wave of Italian immigration in this country occurred in the eighth decade of the 19th century, simultaneously with the Italian immigration in Lorraine, but much earlier than the one in Belgium and Germany, mostly after World War II. The Italians were also advantaged in Luxembourg by the massive arrival of Portuguese immigrants in the sixties of the twentieth century. In fact, according to the sociological mechanism of "integration by exclusion," the Italians were finally accepted in Luxembourg as a "known" national group compared to the "unknown" one (and therefore "at risk") of the Portuguese who arrived in those years. In the 80s and 90s, the Italian component made a qualitative leap through a new wave of migration that was not large numerically, but extremely "enhancing," represented by officials of European institutions and of many banks (there were about 170) that are located in Luxembourg. In the Grand Duchy, Italians have become major employers, trade unionists, bank managers, professionals, mayors, deputies and even ministers.²

All this meant that the Italians were perceived in the Grand Duchy in a different manner compared to their compatriots living in the neighbouring countries. It is no coincidence that among the books written by Italian people in Luxembourg,³ migration memoirs were rarely registered, compared to a remarkable amount of texts of literary fiction, which provide a picture of their authors as true citizens of the world. The language used is almost exclusively Italian, used relatively often even in Luxembourgian environments, which appreciate its value. This level of social and cultural inclusion has led to a detachment from the nostalgic component of the memory of immigration, causing the Italians to turn more towards the present and future through the establishment of more than 60 associations (regional, provincial, cultural, etc.), which during the fifteen years of "Buona Domenica" used to have their President hand write to the editorial department of the show, asking the network to advertise an event planned by them. As we can see, even in this kind of epistolary relationship, Italian immigrants in Luxembourg appear a little more distant or more "institutionalized." On the other hand, a very strong nos-

talgic element is concentrated in France, and especially in Belgium, where Italians, in the eighties and nineties, had a much less accomplished social integration. The same phenomenon was also recorded in Germany, where the nostalgia of the first generation of Italians proved to be the dominant note of the few letters of the "Good Friday" corpus. We would rather not bestow too much importance on the different proportions of the geographical origin of the letters sent to the editor: in fact, the exact choice criteria used are unknown. However, we consider rather curious the coincidence of these proportions with those of the database of the Great Region⁴ of Italian Origin (BAGROI). The BAGROI corpus⁵ has about a hundred authors originating from the following areas:

Luxembourg	41
Saarland and Rhineland-Palatinate	6
Lorena	11
Vallonia	40

The writing activity of Luxembourg and Belgium is particularly striking compared to the more reduced production in Germany, despite the presence of 30.000 Italians only in Saarland. If, on the one hand, we noted that emigration to Germany in the fifteen years of "Buona Domenica" was of the first generation and belonged to the working-class, scarcely familiarized with writing, it is hard, on the other hand, to justify such a low presence of letters sent to the show editor only due to poor writing knowledge. We believe, however, that many letters from Germany have not been kept for reasons entirely questionable.⁶

¹ Many people consider "Buona Domenica" as the origin of a significant increase in the number and activities of Italian associations on the territory of Luxembourg and its surroundings thanks to the advertising and promotion of various associative activities on the TV show.

² Cicotti, Claudio. "D'Italiener." *Lieux de mémoire au Luxembourg. Usage du passé et construction nationale*. Margue Kmec, Péporté Majeris (eds) Luxembourg: Editions Saint-Paul, 2007. 109–114.

³ In Luxembourg there are more than 40 Italian authors (or of immediate Italian origin).

⁴ The territories of the Great Region coincide with those of Luxembourg, Wallonia, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saarland and, finally, Lorraine.

⁵ Soon online at: www.italianistica.lu.

⁶ Cf. C. Cicotti, "Scrivo per (non) nascondermi. Il sogno iperbolico autobiografico nei romanzi dei migranti italiani." *Prismi*. Paris: Chemins de tr@verse. 9 (2010): 197–214; ID: "La BAGROI (Banque des données des Auteurs de la Grande Région d'Origine Italienne) comme témoin d'intégration." *Migration et mémoire: concepts et méthodes de recherche*. Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2010. 141–158.

Biographical Note

Claudio Cicotti teaches Italian Literature at the University of Luxembourg. He has written articles on the literature of the 17th, 18th and 20th centuries on philology and lexicography. His main field at present is the migration literature. He initiated and coordinated the research project *Presence, History, Memories of Italians living in Luxembourg and in the Great Region*. He is coordinating the research project *Textuality of Italians living in the Great Region and Integration* (TIGRI).