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From Bilingualism in Sicily to Trilingualism in Australia

The participants of my study are two families who migrated from Sicily to Australia in two successive waves of the mass migration movement that took place after the Second World War (cf. Introduction).

Family A belongs to the immediate post-war migration of the 1950s. Both parents arrived as adolescents with their respective families from a small village through the mechanism of chain migration. As a result, all their close family members are in Australia, and contacts with Sicily have always been very sporadic. Furthermore, Family A arrived in Australia during the immigration policy of assimilation. Family B migrated from a large town at the end of the 1960s as a single family unit and the majority of their relatives remained in Sicily. Therefore regular contacts were maintained through letters, phone calls and some visits. Furthermore, Family B arrived in the years of the policies of integration and multiculturalism, when the different languages and cultures brought by immigrants were acknowledged as having a legitimate space in a pluralistic country (cf. Chapter 1).

While the two families share some similarities (for example, overall socio-economic background), they are representative of different migration and settlement stages and patterns, which are also reflected in their sociolinguistic situation before and after migration. Family A comes from a small village where in the 1950s the prevailing language was Sicilian, whereas Italian was used mainly as a second language and only in a few confined sites. Family B, on the other hand, arrived from an urban context where throughout the 1960s Italian was spreading at the expense of Sicilian, as a result of such factors as compulsory education and the Italian media. Thus, although in both families Sicilian was the dominant language, overall Family B had more exposure to Italian. For the two families, migration to Australia meant a restructuring of their
initial bilingual (Sicilian–Italian) repertoire through the acquisition of English. Here too differences can be noted, with a higher use of English in Family A and more maintenance of Sicilian and Italian in Family B, partly as a result of changes in the Italo-Australian community and in the broader Australian context. The different language choices and patterns that emerge in the two families, particularly across generations, are explored in Chapters 4 and 5.

In this chapter, I outline the linguistic situation in Sicily and in the Italo-Australian community, in order to account for the sociolinguistic background of the two families and provide a broader context to my study.

In the first part I deal with Sicily and the pre-migration language experience of my participants within the Italian setting. I first discuss the relationship between Italian and dialect in a synchronic and a diachronic perspective, so as to make clear the position of the Sicilian dialect(s) as a sister language to Italian. I then present the quantitative distribution of dialect and Italian to clarify the collocation of the two languages in the Italians’ repertoire. As will be shown, a number of the trends identified nationwide also apply to language use in Sicily. Subsequently I focus on Sicily, with (i) a brief description of the Sicilian dialect(s) vis-à-vis standard Italian, to highlight the structural distance between the two languages; and (ii) a discussion of the complex situation of bilingualism existing in the island.

In the second part of the chapter I present the language situation of my participants after migration to Australia. I discuss the collocation of Italian in Australia based on the Census data, the speech repertoire of Italo-Australians and the main findings that emerge from research about language choice, maintenance and attitudes across different generations of Italo-Australians. Throughout my discussion I highlight those findings that specifically regard Sicilian migrants in Australia. In fact, while several linguistic trends are common to Italo-Australians of different regional origin, those few studies that have compared the Sicilian-Australian with another regional group (for example, Bettoni and Rubino, 1996) have shown that differences can be identified with regard to such issues as use of dialect or attitudes towards dialect and Italian. In order to place this study within the broader literature of Italian and dialects outside Italy, a final section is devoted to a brief overview of studies dealing with Italian and dialect in other English-speaking contexts of Italian migration.

2.1 An Italian perspective: dialect vs Italian

Italy has been for centuries a multilingual country, due to the presence on its territory of several distinct languages, today referred to as