

Le voci degli italiani (Voices of Italians): The Linguistic Assimilation of Postwar Italian Immigrants in Argentina and Australia
Julia Perillo, Class of 2022

Following the economic devastation after World War II, many Italians became disillusioned by the lack of job opportunities in Italy and began to leave for Australia, Argentina, and the U.S., among other countries. Much research has been done into the experience of Italian immigrants in the U.S., with several historical accounts regarding this wave of immigration, but there are few specific anthropological efforts to explore the linguistic assimilation of these immigrants who were forced to learn Spanish and English to integrate into the societies of Argentina and Australia, respectively. Regarding this lack of concentrated research, I designed this summer research project to investigate the experiences of immigrants and their descendants as they assimilated to the languages and cultures of these new nations. I examined how the immigrants responded to the rules and regulations of the dominant languages in Australia and Argentina and to understand the language hierarchy (the relationship between the new, dominant language and the heritage language, Italian) that formed as a result.

To begin addressing these questions, I started by conducting a broad literature review to offer historical context to this specific wave of immigration. I researched the economic situation in Italy that led many people to leave, and I studied the political, linguistic, and racial histories of Argentina and Australia to understand the recent past of those nations and foreground my examination of the reception of Italian immigrants following World War II. Once I collected and worked through a variety of historical texts, I began writing notes and questions that I will utilize in the future during interviews. Overall, I consulted a wide range of sources, including books about Argentine, Australian, and Italian history for context to specific articles about linguistic assimilation, bilingualism, constructions of race, and identity. I have written reflections that tie the theoretical, anthropological concepts around linguistic identity to the events of this wave of Italian immigration to Australia and Argentina.

My family, of Italian and Latin American origins, has personal ties to this moment in history. My grandfather was 19 years old when World War II ended, and he had several older siblings who had already left Italy and begun new lives in Australia, Argentina, and the U.S. Eventually, he decided to settle in the U.S. himself, but I still have many cousins who live in Australia and Argentina.