Linguistic practices and identity construction on social media: Italian Americans on Instagram

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Paper Abstract

Between the 19th and the 20th centuries, Italian migrants who arrived in the United States built their identity through the cultural encounter with their foster society (Michaud, 2011). Nowadays, a significant number of younger Italian Americans have shown greater interest in their heritage (De Fina, 2014), and many have turned to social media to engage with it. Since social media facilitate exchanges within ethnic communities (Dekker et al. 2015), this work aims to test the hypothesis that Italian Americans deploy linguistic practices on social media to engage with their heritage and shape their ethnic identity (Longo, 2023). In this initial phase of this qualitative research, to deal with a manageable yet representative pilot dataset, I gathered and examined 250 comments posted by Italian American Instagram users under posts shared by accounts discussing Italian American culture. To construct my dataset, starting from March 31st, 2024, I clicked on the first five accounts listed after having typed "Italian American" into the Instagram search bar. I, then, opened the ten most recent posts for each account; finally, I selected the first five comments for each post and ended up with a total of 250 comments, which were examined by means of a linguistic-pragmatic approach. At this stage of my research project, being a pilot study, I preferred focusing on methodology prioritising each step of the analysis over quantity reliance, therefore I selected and worked on 250 comments only. The analysis of the data has shown three main aspects, which will be corroborated (or not) by the analysis of a larger dataset. Firstly, all the Italian Americans whose comments were examined are native speakers of English as L1, thus showing the effects of the language shift that characterised the Italian American experience between the first and the second generation and that caused members of the latter to lose proficiency in their heritage languages (Haller, 2011). Secondly, in spite of their limited skills in either Italian or their parents' and grandparents' regional dialects, many Italian American Instagram users proudly defend their heritage, and some even share their families' experiences after their arrival in the U.S., thus shaping their own identity via their interactional linguistic practices (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) and through their ancestors' experiences. Thirdly, some features typical of online language (Yus, 2011) are used by Italian Americans on Instagram not only to communicate with one another but also to signal allegiance to their roots.

Keywords: digital ethnography, ethnic identity, Italian Americans, social media language, sociolinguistics

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