

Language shift and morphological attrition among second generation Italo-Australians

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In the past decade the relevance of a variety of paradigms has been stressed in the discussion on migrant languages. Particularly noteworthy, beside the classic paradigm of language contact, are those of language attrition and loss (cf. Lambert and Freed 1982), pidginisation and language acquisition (cf. Andersen 1983), genetic linguistics (cf. Thomason and Kaufman 1988) and language death (cf. Dorian 1989). While the insights from fertilisation across paradigms are undeniable, their main achievement has been once again the conviction that the *primary* determinant of the linguistic outcome of language contact is the sociolinguistic history of the speakers, rather than the structure of their language (Thomason and Kaufman 1988: 35). Thus the strongest caveat lies in a precise delimitation of the social, as well as linguistic, terms of comparisons across both different paradigms and their methodologies on the one hand, and different language situations on the other.

Accordingly, in this analysis of morphological attrition in the speech of second generation Italians in Australia, I will first give a general outline of the history of their parents' migration to Australia and the broad trends of their own shift to English. Against this background, I will present the most salient sociolinguistic characteristics of my informants. Then I will proceed with the analysis of the linguistic data. Finally I will relate the linguistic results to the shift to English, and briefly discuss the paradigms of language attrition and language acquisition, as they pertain to this particular speech community.

1. *The speech community.*

1.1. *Settlement history.*

Italian migration to Australia (cf. e.g. Bertelli 1987, Cresciani 1985, Rosoli 1989 and Ware 1981) reached its peak in the post-WWII period, when in 1951 the Australian and Italian governments signed an agreement for joint financial assistance in the seafare of approved migrants. In the following two decades an average of 17,000 Italians per year arrived in Australia. Typical chain migration patterns created initially closed settlements not only in the rural towns scattered around the country but

also in the large cities' inner suburbs. While ensuring that new migrants from the same family or town found ready welcoming support on arrival, these migration chains also allowed earlier migrants to remain in contact with their place of origin and renew hopes of a possible return. In fact, even if only 20,000 among 350,000 arrivals actually returned to Italy during the 1950's and 60's, few Italian migrants had intended to settle permanently in Australia since the very beginning. Rather, most of them stayed on, year after year, as conditions in Italy improved but slowly and prosperity in Australia was relatively easy to achieve. In the meantime, new habits were formed, their children were growing up with little direct knowledge of the old country, and the desire to return lost its intensity.

By the late 1960's Italian mass migration to Australia had ceased. People arriving in the 1970's were fewer in number and generally of a different make-up from those of the two previous decades. For a large number of them migration did not arise from an urgent need to secure food and clothing for their families, but from a desire to gain new and fruitful experience. Being politically and professionally better equipped and qualified than their predecessors, these later migrants had clearer ideas about workers' social and welfare rights, and had a positive influence on the Italian community by pointing out and helping to solve many issues over a wide array of socio-cultural themes. These differences, however, set them apart from the rest of the Italian community (Bertelli 1987: 36), which in any case was beginning to loosen its cohesive ties and move away from its traditional settlement areas. This is especially true for the rapidly growing second generation in search of more varied job and marriage opportunities.

In the course of the 1980's the tide reversed, and there are now many more Italians returning to Italy than leaving it. Those few who arrive in Australia are either older people joining their relatives under the Family Reunion Scheme, or enterprising businessmen setting up firms under the Business Migration Scheme.

1.2. *Shift to English.*

Italians in Australia are shifting to English much more rapidly than their specific demographic situation would suggest within the context of Australia's language ecology. In fact, Italians have a long history of chain migration; they are the largest non-English speaking community in Australia; and they tend to live close to one another in relatively dense concentrations. Furthermore, their standard language, together with French and German but unlike other community languages such as Greek or Polish, was already taught as a foreign language in schools and universities long before post-WWII mass migration. Nevertheless, in the 1976 census, out of almost one million Australian people of Italian origin, only about 450,000 declared that they used Italian regularly (Clyne 1982).

An overall shift of about 50% might not look too menacing at first sight, but this raw figure hides the increasing speed of the Italian language shift. Clyne (1982: 27-56) has shown that, in the first generation, the shift increases from 5.4% among the older population to 11.7% among the younger migrants. In the second generation, it increases from 18.5% among the children of intra-ethnic marriages to 81.2% among the children of inter-ethnic marriages.

A more detailed study of language use among Italians in Sydney (Rubino and Bertoni 1991) confirms these broad census figures, and shows that well over half second generation Italians now use English even within the family domain, which is the stronghold of ethnic language maintenance in Australia. Furthermore, as Table 1 shows, the younger age of both addressees and speakers seems a crucial factor favouring the shift to English. In fact, first with regard to addressees, while only very few second generation Italians use English with their grandparents, less than a third of them use it with their parents, uncles and aunts, and almost all of them with either spouses, siblings and cousins, or children and nephews and nieces. Secondly, with regard to speakers, the younger ones tend to use more English with all addressees than the older do, although this trend is much more marked when younger speakers address older relatives than when they address relatives of the same age or younger. In fact, in this latter case, both groups of second generation speakers have almost completely shifted to English.

Table 1. *Use of English by second generation Italians in the family domain.*

Speakers	All	Older	Younger
In the whole domain	68%	69%	67%
Addresses			
Grandparents	8%	0%	12%
Uncles & aunts	22%	11%	33%
Parents	36%	26%	47%
Spouses	86%	86%	90%
Children	90%	90%	—
Nephews & nieces	93%	94%	91%
Siblings	95%	93%	98%
Cousins	97%	94%	100%

1.3. *Italian attrition.*

As it is frequently documented elsewhere in contact situations around the world, also for Italian in Australia a rapid contraction in number of speakers and domains of use (i.e. language shift) is accompanied by changes

in linguistic structure (i.e. language attrition). A preliminary case-study of language attrition in an Italian family with four children living in Sydney (Bettoni 1985) suggested the hypothesis that, along a continuum of communicative modes which has at one end the fully developed syntactic mode and the other the more primitive pragmatic mode, shifting Italian in Australia would evolve from a more syntactic to a more pragmatic mode. Givón (1979: 223-231) has summarised the structural properties of the two modes, and further shown how these are similarly distributed into three contrastive pairs: Pidgin versus Creole, Child versus Adult, and Informal versus Formal language. If we consider (i) that in Australia second generation Italians learn their ethnic language under the dominance of English; (ii) that in a monolingual English-speaking school they are not given the opportunity to develop their native, childish Italian; and (iii) that they are not encouraged to do so on their own because they need it mainly in the informal family domain, it comes as no surprise that their language shows some of the properties typical of Pidgin, Child and Informal language. More precisely, considering some of the structural properties listed in Givón (1979: 223), Bettoni (1985) indicated that compared to their parents' the children's discourse tends to (a) be delivered at a much slower rate and involve more pauses and repetitions; (b) involve a reduction of grammatical morphology; (c) exhibit a greater amount of internal variation and inconsistency; and (d) favour loose coordination over tight subordination.

A second study (Bettoni 1986) verified this hypothesis with data from five families, and not only confirmed that the ethnic language of the children does erode in the direction of the pragmatic mode, but also showed that it does so in varying degrees as a function of the children's birth order: namely, that first-born (or only) children tend to retain their parents' ethnic language to a greater extent than their younger later- and last-born siblings.

1.4. *The informants.*

The linguistic analysis in section 2 below uses data collected for the larger project on Italian language attrition. Great care was first taken in selecting informants who were most representative of the classic period of Italian mass migration. Then, in an attempt to isolate both the factors bearing on language attrition and its linguistic attributes, as many variables as possible were controlled in the interview format. A total of twenty informants were interviewed in 1984. Entire families were recruited, including parents, in order to provide a fuller history of language attrition and a reference against which to measure it. The composition of the families is shown in Table 2.

All five families are originally from the Veneto region in northern Italy. All parents were born there and migrated in their twenties between 1955

Table 2. *Family composition of Informants.*

Informants	M family	G family	Z family	F family	C family
Mother	MM	GM	ZM	FM	—
Father	MF	—	ZF	FF	CF
1st-born	MS20	GD21	ZD27	FS26	CD31
2nd-born	MS17	GS18	ZD25		
3rd-born	MS15	GS14	ZD17		
4th-born	MD12				

The 2nd letter in the coding system identifies generation and sex, i.e., M = mother, F = father, D = daughter, and S = son; numerals show the children's ages.

and 1965. They are all working class people from small provincial towns who came to Australia mainly for economic reasons. Venetian dialect is their mother tongue, regularly used at home and among friends of the same region. On the other hand, for use in formal situations and with Italians from different regions, both their drive to upward mobility and the linguistic homogenisation produced by migration (De Mauro 1976⁵: 67) have guaranteed for them also a sound knowledge of Popular Venetian Italian. Their English is viable, in some cases quite good.

All the children were born in Australia. Venetian dialect is their native tongue, but it is clearly no longer their dominant one. It remained dominant until the oldest child in every family started school, socialised with English-speaking peers, and brought fluent English into the home. Once English entered the home, it became unchallenged and the only language used by the siblings among themselves. All the children's English is fully native-like. Italian is their weakest language. Intermittent attempts both on the parents' side to use a more prestigious language for their children's sake, and on the children's side to attend Italian classes failed to produce any noticeable results. Although all the children professed they wished to speak Italian better, none of them seriously invested time and effort in learning it. Thus, for any practical purpose, it is here a question of natural language attrition unchecked by any formal study.

Using Givón's parameters mentioned above, and starting from the syntactic end, then moving towards the pragmatic one, the twelve children can be placed down the attritional continuum roughly in the following order: CD31, ZD27, ZD25, GD21, FS26, MS20, GS18, ZD17, MS17, MS15, GS14 and MD12.

2. *The linguistic analysis.*

An important feature of the attritional process of migrant Italian is the reduction of its morphology (cf. Gonzo and Saltarelli 1983: 185-186; Simone

1988: 92). In this sense, the following analysis represents an expansion of Bettoni (1985, 1986) and sets out to contribute towards the identification of an order of morpheme attrition. On the order hand, it does not claim to be exhaustive, and focusses on a few selective features of nominal, verbal and pronominal morphology, which is taken here as including some morpho-phonological and morpho-syntactic elements as well. The underlying assumption is that the cross-sectional data will provide enough information to enable us to construct an attritional continuum.

2.1. Nominal morphology.

All morphology of the older, most competent second generation children does not differ substantially from that of the first generation. In fact, qualitatively their speech displays the same morphological features as their parents', while quantitatively it exacerbates the tendencies already present there. These tendencies can be clearly traced back either to the essential orality of the texts (e.g. Sornicola 1981), or to those processes of linguistic simplification, analogical regularisation and hypercorrection already active in Popular Italian in Italy (e.g. Berruto 1983; 1987).

The morphology of the nominal phrase, for example, is well mastered by ZD25 in (1), where a change in the agreement of the last phrase is due to short term planning typical of oral texts. Likewise, in (2) the incongruity of the adjectival agreement can be attributed to the same cause.

(1) per scrivere bene credo che devi avere la p / pronuncia dell'italiano perfetta
 invece qualche volta fors'io dico una parola / sbagliata allora lo scrivo sbagliato
 (ZD25)¹

(2) che belo che era l'australia (ZD25)

On the other hand, a process of simplification is clearly evident in the loss of allomorphs in the paradigm of the definite article. Thus, whereas for masculine plural nouns a parent (MM) can alternate *i* with *gli* respectively in '*zocoli*' and '*gli olandesi*', even the most competent children never use the rarer allomorph and, in this case presumably also backed by dialect interference, produce only *i* ('*zii*' and '*studi*' by ZD25, '*ani*' by CD31, '*amici*' by ZD27). Analogy too plays a part in the regularisation of inflectional paradigms of adjectives. Thus, respectively in '*le robe legale*' and '*le scuole superiore*', CD31 and ZD27 analogically apply the feminine

¹ For Italian and Venetian words normal Italian spelling is used, except that capitalisation is avoided and that, in order to give a regional Venetian flavour to Italian, double consonants are spelled (as they are pronounced) with one letter only. For English words pronounced with English sounds normal spelling is used. They are distinguished from Italian and Venetian words by being transcribed in capital letters. Also English sounds occurring in Italian and Venetian words are transcribed in capital letters.

plural *-e* ending of the noun also to the adjectives; and in '*altri parti*' ZD25 generalises as masculine plural the *-i* ending of the noun, then accordingly makes the adjectival agreement. (But also, notice the general uncertainty when this same speaker says '*diversi parte* [= *diverse parti*]'). Finally, hypercorrections already present in the parents' speech ('*qualche cosa di bela*' by MM) can be found also in the children ('*era piuttosto musica italiana*' by CD31, '*qualche volte*' by ZD27). Likewise, examples of similar tendencies can be found also in regard to verbal and pronominal morphology.

While this is not the place to expand on a discussion of the complex issues of either the features of Popular Italian or their varying frequencies, it is nevertheless interesting to note three further points. First, among its classical morphological features listed in the literature, the most competent children display a wide range of those that Berruto (1983) considers unequivocal or possible cases of simplification, but display none of those which he considers clear cases of complication. In fact, absent from their speech is the derivational alteration of nouns and adjectives through evaluative suffixes so frequent in Popular Italian texts. Whether this is so because the formality of the interview situation prevents the speakers from showing the emotive involvement such suffixes normally express, or because a genuine loss has occurred in Australia cannot be ascertained here. Secondly, lexical malapropisms which result from deviances in the complex derivational morphology are also, if not totally absent ('*insegnatrice* [= *insegnante*]' by CD31), quite rare. Thirdly, omissions, although certainly present, are altogether not more frequent in the speech of the most competent second generation speakers than in the first generation's. Thus, for example, the definite article is rarely omitted, except with possessives ('*mia famiglia*' and '*miei genitori*' by ZD25).

Finally, it should be made immediately clear that in the case of the most competent second generation speakers we can refer to morphological attrition only if we argue that an increase in the occurrences of some Popular Italian features constitutes attrition. On the other hand, it should be remembered that Popular Italian itself has been variously defined as a kind of interlanguage, as "il tipo di italiano imperfettamente acquisito da chi ha per madre lingua il dialetto" (Cortelazzo 1972: 11), a "[type of] italiano incompiuto di persone non istruite" (Bruni 1984: 205) or a "grado di approssimazione allo standard inferiore a quello dell'italiano colloquiale borghese" (Mioni 1983: 514), and that consequently the descriptive categories and methodologies normally used in the study of second language acquisition should apply (Berruto 1987: 106). This in turn raises for us the issue of a complementarity between two opposite perspectives: attrition from a maximal standard above on the one hand, and on the other interrupted or imperfect acquisition from a minimal competence below. This issue will be taken up below in the last section.

More interesting from the point of view of clear morphological attrition is the speech of younger or later born children who have an intermediate or poorer competence in Italian. Needless to say, they too display a vast range of phenomena similar to those of their more competent peers, in so far as they are universal tendencies of any substandard language, be it a diastatically low variety, an acquirer's interlanguage (cf. Berretta 1990a: 156) or an eroding language.

2.1.1. The nouns.

Noun morphology remains relatively strong all along the attritional continuum, in so far as even the children at the lower end mark number and gender correctly most times with (i) nouns referring to people with clear natural gender ('*il mio zio*' by MS15, '*la mia sorella*' by ZD17, '*le cugine*' by MD12, '*tre amiche*' and '*il pHrete*' by GS14); and with (ii) masculine nouns ending in -o and feminine nouns in -a ('*il pHosto*' by MS15, '*i giochi*' by MD12, '*la spiaggia*' by GS14, '*di più cose da fare*' by ZD17). On the other hand, predictably, more uncertainty occurs with nouns in -e without natural gender. In this case we notice that while in the speech of the children with intermediate competence there are tendencies towards assimilating the nouns into the larger, less polisemic categories ('*l'ambiente*' by FS26, '*THanTe pHarte*' by GS18), no such tendency can be discerned among the children at the lower end who give the impression of trying at random ('*sui televisione*' by ZD17, '*un istanta*' by MS17, '*THuTe animale*' by GS14). This regularising tendency by the speakers of intermediate competence can also be observed with the more peripheral classes in the system and the less frequent items: whereas for FS26 quite high up on the continuum '*il clima*' is still canonically masculine, in the middle GS18 and ZD17 mark it as feminine ('*la clima*') and MS20 is in no doubt about the femininity of an -a ending noun:

- (1) *sentì cosa ne pensi del clima qui a Sydney, ti piace?*
la cosa? (MS20)

Further down the attritional continuum, the issue is avoided:

- (4) *e il clima?*
CLIMATE? ah: / quando sè caldo e sè / sè NICE CLIMATE (MS17)
(5) *sentì e cosa ne dici del clima qui? / del tempo?*
THempHo qHui è tai: / du uno due tre giorni / THanTo caldo (GS14)

All along the continuum there is a tendency to favour the masculine gender, both with -e ending nouns ('*el capitale*' [= *Canberra*] by FS26) and even with nouns with natural gender ('*tute quante / e e mestri*' by MS20, '*tuti mie amici*' [= *tutte le mie amiche*] by MD12 and excerpts (6-7)).

- (6) *cosa vuoi fare scusa?*

un TEACHER [= la maestra] (ZD17)

- (7) *e poi cosa vuoi fare quando finisci la scuola?*

non lo so / può darsi vo vere secretario / ma / mi non so (MD12)

Finally, also morpho-phonological rules in the plural formation of nouns are normally respected, and when violated they are reinterpreted along Venetian dialect lines: *amichi* and *omini*. In the former example, of some interest is the distribution of the palatalised and non-palatalised forms: while the speakers at the top end of the continuum (i.e. CD31, ZD27, ZD25, FS26 and GD21) use the canonical palatalised form, those in the middle (i.e. MS20, GS18 and MS17) inconsistently alternate between the two forms, and those at the bottom settle for either one or the other.

2.1.2. The articles.

With regard to the articles, some morphological reduction is present all along the continuum, both in terms of formal reduction of allomorphs and in terms of plain omission. As we have seen above, even high up in the continuum, according to Popular Italian rules the phonologically conditioned distinction among articles preceding different types of consonants or consonant clusters is not made, and only that between prevocalic and preconsonantic positions for the singular is maintained. Once this reduction is made, however, deviant forms are relatively rare all along the continuum and never used consistently by any speaker. Some deviant forms are due to clear Venetian interference ('*el capiTHale*' by FS26, '*el SOCCER*' by MS17), others are idiosyncrasies ('*li giorni*' by GD21, '*li sUbegeti*' [= *English: subjects* = *Italian: materie scolastiche*] by GS14, '*e maestri*' [= *le maestre*] and '*a gente*' by MS20), others again are probably due to uncertainty between the indefinite article and the numeral ('*uno sugeto*' by GS14, '*uno frate*' by MD12). Most deviant forms, however, reveal a preference for the masculine article ('*coi droghe*' by FS26, '*sui biciclete*' and '*ai più grande scuole*' by GS18, '*i mie amiche*' and '*i foto*' by ZD17, '*un maestra*' and '*sul camera*' by GS14, '*i sorele*' by MD12).

The omission of the article is not as evenly distributed as the reduced or deviant forms along the continuum. While it progressively increases from the top down, it differentiates dramatically the children at the lower end from the others above. At the top end, article omission occurs mostly with less concrete or collective nouns ('*ha anche problema coi droghe*' and '*no è come inglese*' by FS26, '*pensa che gioventù qua è tropo*' [...] *indipendente*' by GD21), and sometimes also with geographical names ('*le montagne vano fino a ostrià*' by CD31), possibly due to English interference. Further down it increases with possessives ('*con mi scuo*' by MS17, '*era mio compleano*'

by ZD17, 'con mii amichi' and 'questo è mio cinque ano' by GS14, with quantifiers ('tuta vita' by MS21, 'tute case' by MS17), many more geographical names ('i parlava mia tanto de australia' and 'le cugine / de: cHanada' by MD12), and with transfers from English ('perché iero a TOP dea scuola' by MS21, 'lavoro su ENQUIRIES' and 'steso JOB / mi fasevo SAME THING' by MS17) (cf. Berruto et al. 1990: 217). At the bottom of the continuum, not only abstract and collective nouns decrease, and English transfers multiply, but the article is often omitted also in other contexts ('co amico' by MS17, 'la SURFBOARD su onde', 'con onde io mi piacio onde' and 'THempHo' in excerpt (5) above by GS14, 'su radio' by MS15).

2.1.3. The adjectives.

Adjectival morphology predictably weakens down the attritional continuum, but again, as with noun and article morphology, it remains relatively strong in all informants. In fact Bettoni (1986: 69-71) showed that while at the top end and in the middle of the continuum the adjective agreement is canonically marked between 87% and 80% of the times, even at the bottom it resists 61% of the times, as shown by excerpts (8-11) below.

(8) *che scuola è?*

ah una de ah / preti / ah cHaTHoli-cHa [...]

[...] hai ancora amici?

sì eh sì / ah: nien-ah: / THuti va qui a / è un'altra scuola qui ma io va / quella / lì / pHechè questa è no THanta bona / quella è pì / buona / di quella (GS14)

(9) *sono italiani o australiani li tuoi amici?*

ah: questi altri sè / ah: italiani ma chialtri sè ostraliani (MD12)

(10) *e tu cosa pensi dell'Italia?*

oh: / tanti ah: / bei paesi (MS15)

(11) *THante cose che sè bele da vedere (MS17)*

Sometimes, the agreement rule is overextended all along the continuum and applied in a formally canonical way also in adverbial position ('è THanTi beli qua in australia i giardini' and 'le condisioni echEnomiche là non sono Tante bene' by GS18, 'è sola la nona [con cui parliamo italiano]' by ZD17, 'questa è no THanTa bona' by GS14).

Nevertheless both deviant and missing agreements are present all along the continuum, and both types roughly double at the bottom end. Most deviant forms present predictable regularisations in -o and -a for the singular and in -e for the feminine plural of -e ending adjectives ('RUGBY [...] THanTo gRando' and 'una maestra [...] diferenta' by GS14, 'quele giovane' by GD21, 'robe THanTe più / ab: simplice' and 'Thante Thante più persone

sono più distante' by GS18); a few others show again a preference for the masculine ('THuTi questi machine elettronichi' by FS26, 'tanti pHar / pHar- lot / le [= tante parole]' by ZD17, 'tuti / quasi tuti [le compagne]' by MD12).

Two common ways of avoiding the agreement are (i) that of using the adjectives unmarked masculine singular forms for all referents ('molto amicisia' by ZD27, 'qua è THanTo alberti' by FS26, 'questa zona qua è [...] più verde / calmo' and 'è TanTo pace qua' by GS18, 'tanto lesion [= lezioni] da fare' by MS17; and 'ho ThanTo YOU KNOW inglese amici anche' by ZD17, with clear syntactic interference from English); and (ii) that of using an adverb with an adjectival function ('i maetri de: / quarta era / bene' by MS15, 'robe male' by FS26). By far the most frequent way, however, is that of using an English transfer, especially at the bottom of the continuum ('un asilo ch'era MULTICULTURAL' by GD21, '[= la scuola elementare] era EASY' by MS15, 'là / era tanto più DIFFERENT' by ZD17, 'devo studiare di più / questo ano de / de / PREVIOUS ano' by MS17, 'mi CLOSE amiche' by ZD17, 'iera ALRIGHT tempo' by MD12). In these latter three examples, English interference is also clear in the syntax.

2.2. Pronominal morphology.

Pronominal morphology shows a great deal of attrition among the second generation, but unlike nominal morphology the attritional process rather abruptly stops quite high up on the continuum. Space constraints allow us to deal here only with unstressed personal pronouns, and the interview constraints do not allow for all their forms to emerge in the question-and-answer conversation format. Nevertheless, it is clear that while at the top end of the continuum a large range of clitics is mastered in a large range of syntactic situations, even if only according to Popular Italian simplified rules, in the middle and at the bottom virtually no clitic is used in a productive way. Thus, at the top, we find 'speriamo di averne ancora' and 'la bambina me l'ha guardata mia madre' by CD31, 'quando gli interessa a loro' by ZD27, 'qualche volta le dico ala mama' by ZD25, 'certa gente gli piace' by GD21, 'il lavoro è / ab: difficile a trovarlo' by FS26, 'YEAH ce n'ho tr- quattro no / cinque / ab: / zii' by MS20. Of course, given the fragility of the clitic microsystem, some cases of omission occur even among these competent speakers, be it of the more difficult partitive *ne* or the easier existential *ci*, which are respectively at the top and the bottom of Berretta's (1986: 336) acquisitional scale ('ho una sorela più grande / e: ho una / più picola' by ZD25, 'fè stata in italia?] si son stata' by ZD27, 'qua è più oporTuniTHa' by FS26, 'l'ultimo ano ho fato a BALMAIN' by MS20). On the other hand, in the middle and at the bottom, some clitic forms do occur, but they are either rare unanalysed forms ('non lo so' by MS15 and ZD12) or first persons attached to either the rare pronominal verb *ricordare* ('non

mi ricordo' by GS18) or the much more frequent verb *piacere* ('*io mi piaccio qui*' by GS14, '*mi piace*' by ZD17). In this latter context, however, we cannot even be certain that '*mi*' is actually used as an Italian dative, since the parallels between '*mi piaccio*' [= *mi piace*] and '*lu piase*' [= *gli piace*] by MS15, and between '*mi vo*', '*mi studia*' and '*mi piasso*' in (12) below, reinforced by the parallelism with the structure of the English equivalent verb *to like*, suggest that it may be taken as the Venetian subject form of the Italian *io*.

(12) *mi vo a SYDNEY TECH / mi studia note / mi piasso cosita studiare note e lavoro / giorno / il giorno sè lungo però mi piasso e sè / NEW FRIENDS amichi mi ho fato* (MS17)

2.3. Verbal morphology.

Also verbal morphology shows a great deal of attrition among the second generation, but unlike pronominal morphology, the attritional process does not stop abruptly relatively high up on the continuum with the omission of virtually all features concerned. Rather, given the crucial salience of the verb for communicative purposes, roughly at the same point of the continuum Italian verbal forms collapse in favour of dialectal forms.

As we have already seen in the cases of nominal and pronominal morphology, the very top end of the continuum displays little or no attrition if we take into account the simplified rules of Popular Italian. Thus, within the limitations of the interview structure, besides the full conjugation of the indicative, the conditional remains strong ('*luisa / che sarebbe la mia cognata adesso*' by CD31, '*mi piacerebbe ritornare / o anche dovrei scrivere*' by ZD25), the subjunctive often recedes ('*speriamo che l'inverno non viene troppo freddo*' by ZD25, '*non è che lo parlano bene*' by CD31), but notice its occasional reappearance ('*credo che sia andato / esa*' by MS20), and even the tougher sequences, if not formally mastered, are at least attempted or acknowledged ('*credo che m-mi piacerebbe più quel / quel tipo di lavoro / se dovevo andare doves-dovesi / andare indietro al lavoro*' by ZD27, '*voleva che io / trad-trad- [whistle] / tradu- / traduce*' by CD31). Then, already near the top end, the dialect abruptly substitutes for Italian and is there to stay conspicuously in the whole conjugation all along down the continuum ('*THi / parla / THi imparà [= parlì impari]*' by FS26, '*lori i prova parlare in italiano / a me e io parlo italiano indrio*' by MS20, [*il zio magari venisi i- indrio una volta*] by GS18, '*mi fasevo*' by MS17, '*la mia zia ve- è: viusto [= venuta]*' by MS15, '*amichi lì / vieni*' by GS14, '*el siera [= era]*' by MD12).

This abrupt collapse of Italian forms in favour of the dialect, however, is not categorical, but is accompanied by the highest inconsistency not only in near-dialectal, deviant or reduced outcomes, but also in the reappearance of some Italian forms ('*lori i m'ha capHì / io ho capito lori*' by FS26, '*conosco*

[...] *conoso*' by MS20, [*le scuole*] e *finise finisono*' by GS18, '*andato ab / sono andata*' by ZD17, '*mi piagesto* [...] *piaciuto*' by MS17, '*ho ndato* [...] *son andato* [...] *ho dato*' by MS15, '*io va* [...] *io vado*' by GS14, '*el siera un uomo / e lu lu iera GOOD*' by MD12). Notice that in the M-family alone, for example, the third person plural of the imperfect of the verb *essere* can occur as '*era*', '*iera*', '*siera*', '*gera*' and '*gere*', and that among the twelve children the verb *piacere* expressing the present likes and dislikes of the speaker about something which is grammatically singular can also assume five different forms if we ignore the pronoun and twenty-two if we take it too into account (Bettoni 1986: 75).

Among these inconsistencies it is nevertheless possible to discern some method as we move down to the bottom end. First, as we have already briefly seen in the case of the nouns, the widest range of inconsistencies tends to cluster around the middle of the attritional continuum, then peter out towards the bottom (cf. also Bettoni 1986: 75-76).

Secondly, although down the continuum the texts become generally shorter and syntactically less elaborate, and thus necessarily include a more limited range of verbal occurrences, the high degree of their internal inconsistency makes it impossible to say that in any of them there is categorical loss of forms marking at least the present tense and the perfective-imperfective differentiation in the past. Thus, although at the very bottom GS14 might seem to have lost the way of marking morphologically the past in (13), he then does it either with only the past participle or also with the auxiliary in '*ultima settimana ogni giorno piouuTHo*' and '*è m-molto piaciuto qHui qHesta AREA*'.

(13) *cos'avete fatto quando lui era qui?*

va a: / o va ah: / mi marco e papà e lui / va a: / CANSBERRA / la cHapETHale (GS14)

Nevertheless, and thirdly, among these common occurrences of present and past tenses, the first casualty of morphological reduction in verbal morphology seems to be the agreement of the past participle, even if the loss is not categorical. In fact, already quite high up in the continuum we can already find the development of a microsystem in which the past participle is canonically made to agree with the subject when the *essere* auxiliary is present, but remains invariable when the auxiliary is omitted, as shown in (14).

(14) è R- / ritornaTHa da italia / ah: andato fato fato un giro co lui na trovare so parenti in italia ndato / tre mesi credo che sia andato / esa e: quando è ritornata / ah d'iceva che / piaceva multo italia (MS20)

Here, the only violation to this system is '*sia andato*', but notice that while there are no hesitations when the agreement is not made without the auxiliary, as soon as it is not made with the auxiliary, the need to mark

it seems strong if this is done with a pronoun after a thoughtful pause. Also further down the continuum this same pattern is confirmed ('*andato ah / sono andata*' by ZD17, '*andato a MI MUM'S fratelli ah / mi: / mi so andata me cugine*' by MD12).

Fourthly, towards the very bottom of the continuum, although categorical loss does not occur, there is a definite thinning out of verbal occurrences, as clearly shown in (15-16) below, even granting the fact that the question-and-answer format may favour it more than other conversational structures.

- (15) *che scuola è*
 ah una de ah / preti / ah cHaTHoli-cHa e: / un de ah: solo / bam- bam- /
 solo bambini come mi / e: da AGE ah: / ani da // dieci a sedici (GS14)
- (16) *sentì cos'hai fatto quest'estate?*
 ah / piscina / co me fratelli / così
 [...]
- e dove siete stati / siete stati a venezia sì?*
 sì venezia / roma / ah / FLORENCE firenze / e YEAH
e chi c'è in italia dei tuoi parenti?
 ah: tute ah / i fratelli i sorele de me mama / e: mama e pHEpHà de pHEpà
 e s / e: / i frat- SOME fratelli de pHEpà (MD12)

2.4. Discussion.

Even from this brief analysis of morphological attrition among the second generation we can discern a number of patterns. First, setting out from a basis of Popular Italian at the top end of the attritional continuum, the "highly complex paradigms, such as the synthetic or strong preterit forms," which Gonzo and Saltarelli (1983: 185-186) postulate as disappearing first in the evolution of emigrant language systems never come into play in the Australian context, as they are absent even in the speech of the first generation migrants. Not, for the same reason, do there ever come into play many the subtle features which Simone (1987) subsumes under the general label of "grammatica fine".

Secondly, and most importantly, the analysis shows that at the very top of the continuum the three sets of characteristics of nominal, pronominal and verbal morphology are all part and parcel of Popular Italian typology, and as such give a coherent physiognomy to the speech of the Australian children with the best Italian competence. On the other hand, further down the continuum there are substantial differences in these same three sets. Whereas from close to the top downwards, with regard to the noun phrase, morphological attrition seems to be a gradual process along predictable lines of paradigm regularisation and absorption of the more ambiguous polisemic

categories into the larger ones, with regard to pronominal and verbal morphology the continuum seems to turn into a gradatum, with a first sharp step towards the middle. In the case of clitic personal pronouns this first step is fatal, since below it they virtually disappear. In the case of verbs, they are abruptly replaced by either dialect or near-dialectal and deviant forms which inconsistently alternate among themselves and with traces of some fossilised Italian form. Finally, towards the very bottom, verbs too are often omitted.

The reason for this differentiation between the three morphological areas is twofold. On the one hand, both their relative complexity and semantic load play a part, and can explain why (i) the easier nominal morphology is retained longer; (ii) the clitics, which are formally highly complex and fragile, and semantically less crucial, suddenly disappear; and (iii) the formally highly complex but semantically very important verbal conjugation yields to the dialect and deviant alternatives but is retained longer. On the other hand, in these morphological areas, the relative distance between Italian and the Venetian dialect also varies. Whereas nominal morphology in the two languages is to a large extent similar, verbal morphology is quite different, so that in the former case the analysis might tend to give the speakers the benefit of the doubt and attribute to Italian what in fact might well be dialect.

Thus, and thirdly, the coherence noticed in the speech of the most competent speakers at the top of the continuum soon breaks up; further down a relatively wide variety of nominal elements is hesitantly linked together by whatever verbal forms the less proficient speakers can haphazardly retrieve from their repertoire, while of course the clitic pronouns with their finer cohesive ties become dispensable. These last two excerpts by GS14 in (17) can aptly sum up this combination of strong morphological — and lexical — nominal elements with a narrower range of more poorly elaborated verbs.

(17) [...] *ti piace abitare qui a balmain?*

sì io mi piacìo qui pHeché l'acqua / sula barcaHa e a pescare / vado / e / e
 è eh: vicino a ala piscina / e spiaggia / e Thante barche / e ah: que- quel pHiçoli / così

[...]

cosa facevate lì?

bicicleta e // ah: su monTHagne / vado per un giorno / e: sula / non vado sula gondola (GS14)

Finally, at least in the case of our families chosen as representative of the classic period of Italian immigration to Australia, it is arguable whether what has so far been called an attritional continuum should not in fact be reinterpreted as a gradatum with a sharp step down towards the top.

3. Conclusion.

From its very beginning the paradigm of language attrition has been interpreted quite broadly. According to Freed (1982: 1), among other phenomena that are not relevant here, it includes both the decline in use of a language and the loss of a portion of it, and can focus either on an entire speech community or on the individual. Furthermore, according to Andersen (1982) and Dorian (1982), it can refer to both forgetting and failure to acquire, in the sense that in the former case imperfect speakers who were once fully (or more) fluent have subsequently forgotten some portion of a language, while in the latter, imperfect speakers have always been exactly that because they have failed to acquire a language fully. Predictably such broad interpretation of the paradigm can create some confusion.

As should be already quite clear from the paragraphs above, language shift, or the decline in usage, and language attrition, or the decline in formal properties, are kept quite separate here (cf. also Bettoni 1990), although they are obviously related. In fact, it is not a coincidence that in our study here a sharp step in the attritional evolution of Italian occurs roughly between the older first-born children and the younger later-born ones, and that this step down is closely paralleled by a sharp shift to English between the older and younger second generation informants interviewed in a previous study.

It is also no coincidence that the different personal histories of our older and younger children are closely paralleled by different stages in the historical events that shaped the Italian settlement in Australia. In fact, the children who were interviewed in 1984 in their late 20's and early 30's were born in the mid 1950's, and for a number of years grew up with parents who were still conceiving a return to Italy, in a home where no English was spoken, and in a neighbourhood where new families and children kept arriving from Italy; on the other hand, those who were in their teens at the time of the interview were born in the late 1960's, and grew up with parents fully committed to Australia, in a home where English had already entered with older siblings, and in a neighbourhood where English dominated the peer group scene unchallenged by fewer new arrivals. Thus, while for the older first-born children their primary socialisation in Italian allowed them to reach virtually the full competence of their parents, the acquisitional process of the later-born was never completed.

In this perspective, then, when the researcher's focus is on the entire speech community, what happens to Italian in Australia is clearly an attritional process. On the other hand, when the focus is on the individual, it is a process of language acquisition which in the case of the parents and the older children has advanced all the way to full competence, while in the case of the younger children it has been interrupted at varying stages

after a favourable start in their youngest years. In this sense, rather than sliding down the attritional continuum, individual children should be seen as climbing up. And conceptually attrition and acquisition should be taken as two complementary points of view of the same phenomenon, and methodologically dealt with in the same way.

The fact that our informants do not reach varying levels of competence which can be neatly placed on a smooth continuum depends on our initial choice of homogeneous families which were most representative of the speech community's core and the classic period of immigration. This, of course, does not mean that a smooth continuum could not be reconstructed in Australia either with longitudinal data or with data collected more widely across the whole community. In either case, however, new methodological problems would arise. In the former, old longitudinal data are lost and new data gathered from now onwards do pertain to a substantially different socio-ethnic situation. In the latter case, Andersen's and Dorian's dichotomy of forgetting versus failure to acquire would have to be accounted for.

In the case of Italian in Australia, it can be expected that both forgetting and failing to acquire would occur. In fact, it is possible to conceive that some first generation migrants, who have married into the monolingual Anglo-Celtic community, severed their contacts with Italy and practically ceased to use their mother tongue, after a certain period of time would have partly forgotten it. Likewise, some second generation Italians, who may or may not have reached full fluency while growing up in an Italian home, can also partly forget their mother tongue if they move out of the community. However, given the history of the Italian settlement in Australia and the nature of the community briefly outlined above, these are rarer cases. Much more frequent is the case in which the first generation, through habitual use, retains virtually intact their pre-migration language skills, while the second generation, through reduced use — but still surrounded by it —, in varying degrees fails to become fully fluent in their parents' language. And, linguistically, there is no guarantee that the process of forgetting should be at all complementary to that of acquiring.

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